

Her Meddling Bears Fruit

When: Unknown at this time

Where: The Earth is not as it once was

The first thing was what the boy saw, as he struggled to open his eyes as though his body had forgotten how. Though only half open he saw two long shadows upon the ceiling of stone and dirt that was above him. The shadows flickered and danced, as though lit by a torch that had been set down in front of them. The second thing was what the boy felt, which was a rough stone, poking up into his back in a most uncomfortable way. The slab he had laid down upon hadn't been meant for his comfort, just something to keep him off the floor during his long sleep. He tried to shift, to move even the slightest inch, but his body would not respond. Then what the boy felt was panic, but through his haze he remembered what his father had told him. That more than a few weeks might pass, and that he might be quite weak when finally woken up again. This calmed him a bit. The third thing was what the boy heard. Two voices, strange, low, and somehow unfamiliar to his understanding.

But that's impossible, the boy thought, trying to calm himself and get past his fear. *How can I not understand people talking?*

The boy did not realize that other languages might exist. The very idea, had he been asked, beyond his imagining. But slowly, as he concentrated and his ears began to recall their task, he began to understand.

"I don't know, do I?" asked the first voice, sounding somewhat upset. "I'm no expert in these sorts of things, am I?" The voice was deep and came from somewhere near the boy's feet. "We removed the funny pieces of paper that were on him and they burned up, what more can we do?"

Another voice, also male but more like gravel being rubbed together answered him. "Not an expert? You always claim to be."

"I do not. You're the one with his nose in a book all the time. You should know more than I."

"Not all the time."

"A good portion of it!"

"Name a time in the last week I've even been near a book."

"You can't use the time we've been exploring these bloody tunnels as your example. There's no book within ten kilometers of here!"

"An exaggeration, as usual."

"Ah, so you do have a book in your pack!"

"I don't. How many times do I have to say it?"

"Then let me see the inside of it."

"No!"

This arguing was not improving the boy's mood or outlook, as neither of these voices were the ones he expected to hear. A male voice, certainly, that of his father. He should have been saved, and been the one to come and get him once it was safe. His mother, and here the boy tried to avoid a sigh and even greater despair, had no doubt been lost and he would therefore never hear that voice again. But these two, they seemed to be more interested in their argument than in his welfare, meaning neither his father, nor his father's friends who had also been chosen, had come to find him. And they had mentioned the wards that had been keeping him asleep and alive without food, how could they not know such a simple thing? He knew wards, granted only a few, but it should have been obvious. Suddenly the boy brightened. The fact that there were voices, and that he was now awake, meant that at least some people had survived the Allfather's wrath and had, at last, come to get him. He struggled to raise his head.

"I think he's awake!" exclaimed one of them.

"Easy lad," said the other. "Don't rush yourself."

His vision was blurry, and the shapes were backlit against the fire he vaguely saw flickering behind them, but as they came to his side his eyes widened.

He had been rescued by monsters.

The figure nearer to him was the taller of the two, but only slightly. His skin seemed almost misshapen, protruding out at odd angles and almost looking as if a pile of rocks had grown a face and decided to walk around and look for a bite to eat. The other was shorter, and the boy might have mistaken him for someone his own age, had he not had a beard that reached to his stomach. His limbs were oddly short, and the boy wondered what could have created such freakish looking beings. Both were dirty, wore rough clothes badly in need of a cleaning, and in the flickering firelight shadows obscured their faces as they advanced. The boy tried to move, tried to scramble away, but could only manage a horrified expression and a slightly high pitched whine from his throat.

The boy realized his throat was very dry, and wondered just how long he had been asleep for. The figures made no sudden moves, but that made them no less terrifying in his eyes. Both must have picked up on his reaction as they stopped advancing.

"Easy lad," said the bearded one. "We're not here to hurt you. Goodness, but he's a scrawny one, isn't he?"

"Oh sure, insult him right to his face. Great way to earn his trust."

"He won't understand dwarvish, he's a human!"

The boy dimly realized that the bearded one's words *had* sounded different a second ago, but he had bigger problems. The two were staring at him. Wondering if he was good to eat, perhaps? Who could tell with such beings?

"Stay away," he tried to say, but couldn't manage more than a weak rasp.

"It's water you'll be wanting," said the bearded one. "Here, pass this up to him, Everest."

The figure took a bag from the other and uncorked it. "You'll feel better after you've had something to drink." He held the bag out and lifted the boy's head. His eyes widened but he didn't yet have the strength to pull away, and had to accept the bag that was lifted to his lips.

He almost thought that they meant to poison him in some way, and resolved not to drink, but then realized this was a rather silly thing to do. If they wanted him dead, why had they woken him up? They might have been misshapen, not humans like himself and clearly not any angel he had ever seen or heard about, but perhaps he should gauge their intentions before refusing this badly needed aid. He swallowed some water, the creature only allowing him sips at a time, and did begin to feel better.

"Thank you," he managed when the bag was lowered, and a blanket of some kind was placed under his head so he could at least look at his rescuers a bit more easily.

"You take your time, lad," said the bearded one. "We'll introduce ourselves first. Only fair, and all that, no? This nasty piece of work is Everest, a gnomad as you can clearly see. A face only a mother could love, but his heart is somewhat in the right place nearly most of the time." He pinched the other's cheek with a smile.

"And this," said Everest throwing his arm around the other, "is Whitebottom Clearwater Talltree the fifth, and a surlier dwarf you'd be hard pressed to find anywhere."

"Don't confuse the lad, I introduced you properly didn't I?"

"You did get my name right! My apologies. Friend, this doesn't seem the time for our usual games, does it? This is Axhandle McGee, shortest giant in these parts."

"Would you quit that!?" He shoved the gnomad's arm away from him. "I'm Don. Don Fortress, at your service. And I am a dwarf, he was right about that."

"I wouldn't lie about that part," said Everest with a conspiratorial wink. "He's as dwarfy a dwarf that ever dwarfed."

"Dwarf? Fortress?" managed the boy.

"Please, call me Don," said the dwarf, stroking his beard with his right hand.

"Oh, leave that alone, you'll go blind." He turned back to the boy. "Are you feeling a little better? Want some more water?"

The boy nodded and took several more sips, then nodded and the bag was taken away.

"I'm Lysanias," he announced. "Did my father send you?"

The two looked at each other, then back at Lysanias. "No one sent us, lad, unless you count that funny little beastkin girl."

"Don't suppose you know her? Shorter than us, fox tail and ears? Funny clothes, too, come to think of it."

Lysanias shook his head. He didn't know any monsters like that. Didn't sound like any angel he had heard of either. A person that was part animal? How could such a thing even exist?

"Paid us to map out these tunnels for her, and gave us a pretty big sack of silver to do it too," added Everest.

"Uh, don't tell him that," Don shushed him. *Yes, that does sound different. Why is that?*

"What? You think he's going to rob us or something? Besides, we're not lugging it through these tunnels, it's back at home. What's he going to do about it?"

"True. Anyway, we stumbled across you because I was sure there was some gold in this direction, or at least something valuable. Turned out to be your sword I was smelling."

"Sword?"

"Yeah, the on fire one?" Don stepped aside and pointed to the foot of the room, and Lysanias raised his head a bit more to look over his-

"What's happened to me?" he shouted, looking his body over. His clothes didn't fit anymore, they were far too small for him. And as he raised his hands to his eyes he further cried "And my hands. What's happened to my hands?"

"They look perfectly ordinary to me," Everest assured him. "Though we did wonder why you were wearing such tiny clothes."

"Your beard though, that's really something," remarked Don, stroking his own again.

"Beard?" Lysanias' hands flew to his face and he sat up, propping himself up with his left hand. There was a beard there, and his hair was long, far longer than it had been before. "What's happened to me?" he wailed, panic rising in his voice again.

"Now take it easy," Don uselessly suggested. "Tell us what you expected to see, and we can tell you what we see."

Lysanias had to admit they had a point. With no mirror these two were his only means of discovering what had happened, what had gone so terribly wrong after he had been sealed away.

"I should be smaller," he tried to tell them. "My hands are so big now!"

"How old are you, lad?"

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen?" they both cried. "Are you sure?" asked Everest.

"Of course he is," Don admonished him. "Who doesn't know how old they are?"

"You, after a few pints too many."

"I didn't quite recall the way home, not how- never mind that! Lad, how long have you been down here for? That beard didn't grow in a day or even a year."

"How's he going to know that?" Everest shot back. "He's been asleep the whole

time.”

Don stared at him, but conceded the point. “Fair enough. Lad, what year do you think it is?”

“Year? Let me think... Probably 1642 I guess?”

The two got a very shocked look on their faces and stepped away from the boy. They had a hushed conversation and Lysanias took this opportunity to look himself, and the sword they had pointed out, over. He was thin, very thin actually, like the wards that should have kept him healthy and whole had failed, or their power had been diminished for some reason. His arms and legs both were weak and longer than they should have been, and he wondered idly how tall he was now. Certainly taller than either of these two! The sword, that he recognized. It belonged to his father’s friend, the one that usually made weapons for the village to try and defend it against those awful nephilim. But what was it doing here, and why did it seem to be on fire? He had never seen it do that.

Don pushed Everest forward, who looked resigned to doing something unpleasant. “You’ll find out sooner or later,” he started. “So I guess it’s best we just tell you. As we figure it, this is roughly the year 2102.”

The two let that sink in a moment.

“I’ve been in this cave for almost four hundred years?” he gaped. “What happened to my father? Why didn’t he come get me like he promised? Was the flood that bad? Did Atlantis not survive it?”

Now the two just looked puzzled. “What flood?” Everest finally asked.

“*The* flood! You can’t have missed it,” Lysanias seethed. “The one the Allfather was going to use to wipe out humanity? That one? We didn’t have long to prepare, a couple of years those that could see into the future said. But it should have been finished.”

Again the two had a hushed conversation, but Lysanias was growing impatient. He swung his legs over the side of the platform he had been laying on and gingerly put a foot down. It seemed to hold his weight so he tried the other, still holding on to the side of the platform. The two now were doing some funny little ritual where they both threw their hands out, and Don got a pained look and came over to him. He had to look up and up to look him in the face, it seemed Lysanias was a bit taller than he was after all.

“Should you be moving around like that?” he asked.

“Just tell me what’s happened. Obviously the flood didn’t kill everything, so what happened? Why did it take so long for me to get rescued? Is my father dead after all?” He felt a pang of sadness as he said this, but it was always a possibility. There was no real way to hide the construction of the floating city of Atlantis from *the Allfather Himself*, after all. There was every possibility it was simply smashed to pieces by divine might as the storm raged. If the Allfather wanted his creation dead to the last man, he was sure more than a bit of rain would be involved in the effort.

“You might want to keep sitting down,” Don suggested. “But it’s up to you, of course. Lad, I think there are a few things, unpleasant things, you’re going to have to hear.”

“It can’t be that much worse, can it? Are there no humans left, or something? Am I the last?”

“No, there’s people left. All sorts, and all over the place.” But still, Don hesitated.

“Okay?”

“It’s just, you talk about a flood, and it wiping humans out. Are you sure you don’t mean a moon?”

“Moon? That was no moon. No, it was rain, as far as our future seers could tell at least forty straight days of it. He was really angry with us, for some reason.” Lysanias shook his head, remembering. “A few angels came to warn us, near the end, but by then it would have been far too late. Why? What happened to the moon?”

“One, one thing at a time, lad. If you’re sure.” Lysanias nodded his head. “Okay. The thing is...”

“Go on, tell him,” prompted Everest.

“The thing is, there was only one flood your flood could possibly be, and those records are really only fragments at this time.”

“We only know because I happen to like reading old books, and searching out really old stories of the world before the fall,” explained Everest. “And you can’t get more before the fall, or an older story, than that one.”

“Know what? What old story?” Lysanias’ legs couldn’t hold him up anymore and he lowered himself to the platform again, at least able to sit upright.

“Let’s divide things into ages, that might be easier!” suggested Don. He looked around and found a few stones littering the ground. “Right, here’s your age, which I guess is what started everything.” He put a stone down. “Then, I guess after about fifteen hundred years or so the Allfather wiped you all out. But then he made some different people, and they carried on in your place. This would be the second age.” He put another stone down.

“People like you guys?”

“Ah, no, we came later,” he hedged. “We’ll get to that. That age lasted a good while, but eventually it ended too, when a man chosen by the Allfather was killed. That started a pretty dark time, as we understand it.” He put a third stone down. “But things got better, and great cities were built, and many wonders were constructed by people with their understanding of science.” Lysanias looked at him funny, he didn’t know that word. But Don went on. “Then the chaos moon showed up in the sky, and magic came back to the earth.” He put down a fourth stone. “This is where we are today.” He pointed to the far end of it.

“Oh, I know about magic!” Lysanias bragged. “I, uh, don’t really know any, there weren’t many angels that were willing to teach us that. I know it can do a lot of great stuff. But anyway, go on.”

“That’s all there is to tell. Four ages, destruction and rebirth every time.”

“So, wait, how long did each of these ‘ages’ last, anyway? It couldn’t have been long, it’s only been four hundred years!”

Don looked away, unable to continue.

“The calendar usually started over,” explained Everest. “We call this AF, for After Fall.”

“Wait, this moon of yours, it showed up two thousand years ago?”

“Again, records are spotty, but as near as—”

“No way. No way can I have been left down here for more than two thousand years.”

“It’s worse than that, lad,” Don said sadly. “This second age?” He tapped the middle stone. “It was probably at least two thousand years too. Maybe more. Maybe a lot more, the moon really did a number on records from that time. And the third lasted longer than that.”

Lysanias’ throat went dry again, and it had nothing to do with lack of water. He wasn’t sure what “did a number” meant, but he could guess. “It’s been over six thousand years since I was sealed away?”

The other two dropped their eyes, they couldn’t bear to look at the man who now was realizing that not only was his world gone, but the world that replaced it was gone, and the world that replaced that one... Was gone. Lysanias sat, stunned, thoughts both frozen in his head and racing and a furious pace. Atlantis must not have survived, or at least his father hadn’t. His friends, they were gone. His village was no more. He didn’t know how this world worked. Didn’t have any skills he could contribute. Did the Allfather still want him dead? Not personally, he had never done anything really wrong, but he doubted the being that decided to wipe out what He had created would leave a job undone. Even in this, last, smallest, detail. Tears were now threatening to spill out of

Lysanias' eyes as the weight of thousands of years, missed and missing years, threatened to crush him like a grape.

"What am I going to do?" he pitifully asked.

2

Coming to terms

When: Some 8000 years + 15 or so minutes after the boy was sealed away

Where: A cave deep in the earth

Neither the dwarf nor the gnomad had any answer for the boy, and both were perhaps silently regretting ever having set foot in these stupid tunnels. Silver or not, was cruelly yanking this boy, now a man, out of his long sleep really a kindness? But at the same time was leaving him to sleep for all eternity any better? They looked upon the pitiful figure, lost and forlorn, sitting there on the stone slab that served as his bed these thousands of years. Tears silently ran down his cheeks as he mourned the loss of all he knew, and neither had words of comfort to offer him. What could they say? What levity could they provide a man who had passed the world by for so long?

None.

And so they did not try. Neither moved to comfort the man, this stranger out of time, for even that right was denied them. They had found the boy, broke the news to him, but they did not know him. They could not begin to imagine how he felt, waking up to news of this kind. To pretend they did, to offer him reassurance where none could truly be had? That would ring false to even the dullest of mind, and neither would treat him so. The only thing they could do was awkwardly stand and wait for him to compose himself.

But they couldn't ignore his question either, and finally the dwarf spoke up once again. "We won't abandon you, lad. If that's what you're thinking. There must be a place for you in this world, we just have to help you find it. Easy as that!"

Everest looked at the dwarf out of the corners of his eyes as if to indicate he was thinking perhaps his friend had lost his mind. "Sure," he agreed reluctantly. "I suppose it's the least we can do."

"And you're all about doing the least, aren't you Everest?" Don tried to joke.

"Maybe I just like to carefully consider things before acting."

"In the hopes that if you wait long enough, the problem will have sorted itself out."

"Now that's not true and you..." Both looked over at Lysanias, again perhaps realizing now was not the time for their little arguments. Everest cleared his throat.

"Anyway, like Don said, we'll have a long walk back to any kind of civilization so there's plenty of time to discuss things. Our world, and what place we can find for you in it."

"We aren't heading back just yet though," Don told him.

"We aren't?"

"Of course not! Have the tunnels been mapped? I think not. I'm not going to let a job go unfinished."

Everest pulled Don away again and Lysanias listened carefully. *Yes, the sound of their words does seem different*, he decided. *What a strange thing.*

"What are you talking about?" Everest quietly demanded to know.

"What do you mean, what am I talking about?"

"I mean doing this supposed 'job' of course."

"What about it? Just because we found the kid doesn't mean we should go back."

"Don't you get it? Finding the kid *was* the job."

"How do you figure that?"

Lysanias now politely coughed. "My name is Lysanias, and you might as well include me in your conversation, if that's okay. I can understand you perfectly."

They both jerked their heads to look over at him, then looked abashed. "You can understand us?" Don asked.

"Of course."

"What about this?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yeah."

"That's odd."

There was a moment of silence. "What is?" Lysanias asked.

Everest snapped his fingers. "You've got some kind of translation magic going, don't you?"

"Some what?"

"You know, to understand different languages."

"Different... Languages? What are you even talking about now? How can there be more than one way of talking to each other?"

They looked at him like he was growing horns, and Lysanias somewhat resigned himself to both giving and receiving that sort of look many times a day for the foreseeable future. It seemed things had changed a lot more than he thought was possible. *But what if this is the least of the changes I'm about to hear? What if this, for them, was so obvious they didn't even consider a time when there was just one, what did they call it? Language? That there have been so many ways of communicating, and for so long, it's just normal for them? And how much more is 'normal' for them that's going to make me look like a fool?*

"Don't that beat all?" Don asked. "Well, if nothing else you can offer your services as a translator. Plenty of call for that, especially in the bigger cities. Magic being so costly, and all."

"Are you sure you weren't left with any translation magic? Or those paper things we took off you?" asked Everest.

"Wards? No, I don't think so." He looked himself over and checked inside his clothes. *Ugh, I'm going to need new clothes immediately. These are basically rags.* "Nope, nothing. Besides, like I said I didn't know there could be other ways of talking so why would I have been left with something to understand different ways?"

"Good point lad. So, no secrets then, eh? Anyway, as I was about to say. In addition to not leaving the job only partly done, we need to give Lysanias here time to adjust to the new world he finds himself in. I'm sure he's got a lot of questions, and everything we take for granted will be totally foreign to him."

"We need to give him time to regain his strength too," Everest mused, looking the man over. "He's going to need a little more than water to cover the distance we've gone since leaving home."

"That's the spirit!" Don roared, smacking Everest on the back. "Speaking of food, what have we got left from this morning?"

"Not much," Everest replied, heading away from the circle of fire light and to a nearby sack. "With your appetite," he added when he returned, holding a brown sack.

"It does vanish after a day, might as well not waste it."

"Like it's so tough to get more."

"Why go through the effort?"

Everest just shook his head and rummaged through the sack he brought over. He seemed to think about it, then just spilled the contents out on the slab next to Lysanias. "Help yourself, I guess."

Many of the things that tumbled out were quite strange looking to him, but Lysanias was quite hungry. Don brought out a knife and was slicing up various things to make it easier for him, as he dropped the first thing he tried to pick up. He stared at his arms, so long now, wondering when he would be used to such gigantic fingers and hands. *Can't wait to try walking with my long legs either,* he thought sarcastically. *That's going to be a laugh and a half. For them.*

Lysanias found the food strange and rather bland, but sampled all of it. Both insisted he not eat too much, give his body time to get used to the idea again, and Lysanias figured they would know best. He stretched and yawned.

"I've slept for thousands of years," he said, still trying to get used to the idea. "You would think I wouldn't be tired."

"How *did* you manage that, lad?"

"Those wards you took off." They looked at him questioningly. "Those bits of

paper,” he clarified. “They’re called wards. They contained supernatural power to keep me asleep and alive until I could be rescued. There must be some around the cave to keep the air fresh too.” He gestured out into the darkness, and the others looked around, nodding.

“You ever heard of such a thing?” Don asked Everest.

He looked thoughtful, but shook his head. “No power like that, or this ward thing he mentioned. Not known anymore, maybe? Who knows what was lost in all the upheaval we’ve gone through.”

“Great,” Lysanias suggested sarcastically. *I should have listened to my mom and learned some more of them when I had the chance. Too late now, I guess.*

Don saw he was thinking about something sad again, and held out a hand. “How about trying a few steps?” he asked, hoping to take Lysanias’ mind off it.

“You’re not teaching him how to dance, the boy will be hard pressed to walk the length of this cave!”

“Not dance, you dunce! I mean taking a few steps- walking!”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say?”

“I did say!”

I think these two have been together far too long without anyone else to talk to.

“Let’s try it,” Lysanias said, knowing he would have to try sooner or later.

They made a slow circuit of the cave, Lysanias holding on to the dwarf and trying not to trip over himself as they went into the darker areas. Naturally there was a stone in the way he didn’t see, and tumbled into the dwarf.

“Sorry, sorry!” he said, trying to extract himself. Something was poking him in the belly, and he froze.

“Yer stuck on my belt knife,” said the dwarf dryly. “The hilt went straight through that thin material your shirt is made of.”

Lysanias breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t what he thought. Together they extracted themselves and Everest helped him back to the slab. He sat down heavily.

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” he declared.

“Walking?” asked Don, brushing himself off.

“Being so tall.”

“It’s not so great, being tall,” Don assured him, eyes narrowed.

“I don’t think he meant in that way,” Everest told him.

“How do you know?”

“Please you two, not now.” He held his head. “I feel stronger, but it’s going to take a while. Hope you’re not in a hurry.”

“We’ll take all the time you need, lad.”

“Thanks.”

So the group rested. Every few minutes Lysanias would take a turn around the cave. First hanging on to the slab for support, then finally managing it without that crutch. He had too many questions bouncing around his head, and the others weren’t sure where to start, so for most of this an uneasy silence had descended on the small group. Finally Lysanias decided to start somewhere.

“So what is a dwarf, and what did you call yourself, Everest? A gnomling?”

“A gnomad, actually. We’re quite similar, I’d be happy to explain it.” His voice took on a lecturing tone and he stood a little straighter. “A gnomad is a bipedal, mortal humanoid, descended from the union of a human and an earth elemental or gnome. Contrast this with the dwarf, which is a humanoid directly derived from demonic stock that migrated to the human world and became mortal over a period of hundreds of years. These now mortal creatures, when mating, birthed mortals closer to human than their demonic lineage would suggest was possible and we call those beings dwarves.” He looked smug. “So while we’re not related, long ago in history we came from the same source, that of the demonic earth elemental. Does that clear it up?”

Lysanias stared at him, trying to parse all this.

Don stared to, but for a different reason. "You've been reading again, haven't you?" he demanded to know. "Books. You know that no good ever came from a book!"

"What? No."

"A bipedal, mortal humanoid? Where did you even get words like that from?"

"It's what we are!"

"Yer a windbag, is what you are. Honestly, I didn't even understand that explanation, you think he would?"

"I was quite clear, and accurate. I'm sure he can infer any meaning for words he's not strictly familiar with..."

"You calling me stupid? You know what I think? I think you memorized that out of a book, hoping to sound smart! I'll wager you've got the book right in your pack. Been waiting for a chance to spout that, were you?"

"I read that ages ago, honestly!"

"Oh?" He stalked over to the mouth of the cave and brought a pack into the light. He shook it at his friend. "So I dump this out, and I'm not going to find a book?"

"No! Give that back!" Everest lunged for it.

"Oh no, we're having this out right now." Don pulled it away from him, or tried to.

"Please, don't fight," Lysanias tried to tell them, jumping down from the slab and hastily stepping over to them. He tried to force them apart but all he managed to do was stumble against them both, knocking them off balance. The pack went flying and tumbled open, and all three went down in a spray of limbs.

Lysanias heard a weird sound of both of them as he tried to stand, and realized they were laughing.

"What are we doing?" Don asked, rolling onto his back and looking up at the ceiling of the cave.

"Rolling around in the dirt like a couple of fools?" Everest asked back.

"Admit it, you were showing off!"

"What if I was?"

"Want to impress him, eh? Another fine beard comes along and now I've got competition, is that it?"

Wait, is the gnomad a girl? I didn't think he was...

"Not at all!" insisted Everest.

"Let's not just lie here. Sorry about that, Lysanias," apologized Don. "Let's get this pack picked up then." He got up and hauled Lysanias to his feet, then started picking up the stuff that had tumbled from the pack. "What's this?" he asked, picking up a box that had come open. He held up a glass vial to the light, and rattled the box. There must have been more like it inside. The vial was full of a white crystal grain.

Everest sighed. "It was going to be your birthday present. Which is in another two weeks, if I have my dates right."

"Wait, what? You thought that far ahead? We left a month ago!"

A month ago? How have they carried enough food and water?

"I figured the job might take some time. And you're always complaining how bland the food is you make when we're on the move."

"Wait, is this..." He dumped the box partially into his hand. The vials were similar, but inside some had small flakes of leaves, others a dark powder. "It is."

"Happy birthday, Don. But you don't get any until two more weeks."

"Aw, that's... Come here you big softy." The two embraced, but pulled away, looking embarrassed at Lysanias standing there watching them. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"Er, what is it?" he asked.

"Spices, of course. You must have had them!" Don answered, holding the vial with the white crystals up again.

"Oh, my mom did all the cooking. Maybe?"

"HA! Things haven't changed that much, you see?" Everest said.

"Maybe not. Well." He put the vials back and closed the box up again. "Sorry about ruining the surprise. I'll just-" He went to put it back.

"Oh no!" Everest stopped him. "You're lugging it around now, DD. It doesn't seem that heavy now, sure, but wait until it's been a few hours."

Don laughed. "That's fair." He went and put the box in his own pack. "So where were we?"

"You were trying to tell me what you are," Lysanias reminded them.

"Maybe I better do it," Don suggested. He grabbed some rocks again. "He was right, long ago in history there were no dwarves or gnomads. Just demonic earth elementals." He set the stone down.

"What's demonic?"

The two stared. "You didn't have demons?"

Lysanias shook his head. "We had people, like us, and there were angels. If angels took a person against their will, a nephilim was born some time later. Stupid nephilim. Please tell me they're all dead. Oh, and animals, like bears and fish and stuff. But that's all. I don't know what you mean when you say 'demon.'"

"They're the opposite of angels," explained Everest. "You know how the Allfather created angels?"

"Yeah, sure. They first taught us a lot of stuff. Hardly ever saw one by the time I was born though."

"Some of them rebelled, and become demons."

"Rebelled?" Lysanias was aghast.

"I know, doesn't seem possible but they did it. They needed a place to exist because they weren't welcome back in heaven. And wicked souls needed a place to go when they died... You must have had a demon world..."

"A what? People in my time only died because of accident, or because a stupid nephilim killed them."

"Not because of old age?"

"What's that?" *There's that look again.*

"Anyway," Don went on, "those first corrupted angels became demons and took the souls that did not go to the heavenly realms and turned them into various other types of demon. One of those types was the elemental. There's all sorts of them."

"Air, water, fire, all the various elements," Everest agreed. "When the demon gates opened because of the chaos moon showing up, some came to live here. Those that did, and had kids with humans, those kids were like me. Gnomads." He set a rock down below the first one.

"But those that hung around for long enough lost their demonic taint, and some had kids with each other," Don took over. He put a rock next to the second one so it was now a triangle. He traced an imaginary line from the first two to the other two. "Those were the first dwarves."

"And then there's half dwarves, just to confuse the issue more," Everest put in. "That's a dwarf that had a child with a human. They're a bit taller, but still dwarfy."

"Some, like elves, don't like members of their race having kids with humans," Don added with a grimace. "But we don't mind as much. Stupid elves."

"Right." *Well, I did ask. And it does explain why the gnomad looks like rock, I guess.* "But wait, humans like me die, right?" The other two nodded. "Their souls, whatever that is, goes to this demon world. They become an earth elemental. That earth elemental comes *back* to earth, and starts a new life. They fall in love, have kids, become mortal or whatever. What was the point? They're right back where they started! What happens if they're killed now? Did they get a new soul? Can they go to the heavenly realms now? Could they be sent back to the demon world no matter what? Could they become a different demon? Are they just... gone?"

"You'd have to ask a priest those sort of questions," hedged Everest. "I guess it's

pretty complicated, at least with us. Most demons don't have that happen... I don't know why it did with us, actually. I should make a note to look into that." He stared off into space, deep in thought.

"How many types of demons are there?"

"What? Oh, dozens. Maybe as many as fifty? I don't know that anyone ever really counted. At least not lately."

"That many? What other creatures have been created in the meantime?"

"Well, there's elves, like I said," Don replied. "There's unicorns and trolls and orcs and remnants and fairies and those weird wanderer fellows."

"Beastkin, like that girl we met," Everest added. "And beastfolk, and just talking animals."

"And that's just a start," Don assured him.

Lysanias closed his eyes. There was going to be so very much to learn.

Breaking Camp

When: An hour after Lysanias was awoken

Where: Still in the cave. Sorry.

“So tell me about this chaos moon, or whatever you called it,” Lysanias said after a pause. “That seems to have started this ‘age’ so it’s the one I should be most concerned about.”

“And try to use words less than ten letters in length,” Don requested.

He got a glare for his attempt at humor. “After the unpleasantness that brought about the fall of the previous age, life steadily got better for the people of Earth. Then, out of nowhere this enormous chunk of rock showed up in the sky. But it wasn’t just a chunk of rock, not like the moon we always had. You... You have seen the moon, right?”

“Yes, I’ve seen the moon,” Lysanias assured him.

“I can’t assume that, can I? Well, we have two now. This one did some very bad things to the planet, some we’re still recovering from, in fact. The tides of course all changed, gates to both the demon world and the heavenly realms were tore open, people started changing into trolls, dragons came back. The list goes on and on, really. The most dramatic change, though, was the resurgence in magical energies that happened. There seems to be some kind of regular eruptions from the moon, sending magically charged material smashing into the land above us. That happened fairly regularly when it first appeared, and while less so now, it still happens. People found they could use magic, demon armies started marching through the gates, dragons started setting up kingdoms- it was a mess.

“So the heavens responded. Got the dragons under control, beat back the demonic hordes, that sort of thing. But most of all started lessons in magic so people didn’t go around blowing themselves, or their towns in some cases, up. Nice of them, really.”

Huh, they didn’t offer to teach us magic. Rotten jerks. Wait. “It was really that bad?”

“Oh, you have no idea. People started experimenting with magic and if you’re not really careful, that sort of thing can go pretty badly wrong.”

“I’ve never done any serious magical research,” Don admitted. “I leave that to those much braver than myself.”

“Of course, most spells were worked out ages ago, so there’s less need to at this point.”

“True. If you’ve got the gold most are available for sale. If you know where to look. And the others are, if you *really* know where to look.” He set a finger aside his nose, as if this meant something to Lysanias.

Wait, is Don implying he’s able to use magic?

But the pair went on. “So things calmed down. Civilization as the people of that age knew it was gone, over.”

“Too much damage to the buildings and such... There was a tremendous loss of life during that time.”

“Hard to even say how many died,” Everest agreed. “Of course, you can guess once people started to get a handle on magic, they naturally wanted *more* magic.”

“And that led to magical wars. People weren’t content to have monsters attacking towns, and earthquakes killing people, and fires raging out of control, and demons showing up. No, they had to go and start killing each other as well.”

“Didn’t end well.”

“But it did end, and law started to be set up again, and order was restored. Hundreds of years later, here we all are. Honestly, if things happen on a ‘regular’ cycle of about two thousand years, we’re due for some other great catastrophe.”

“Ah, don’t listen to old conspiracy theory here. Everything’s fine.”

“So that’s a very, very brief rundown of what’s been going on lately.”

“Lately meaning the last two thousand years?”

“Roughly.”

“Great. I get to try and fit into all that?”

“You will,” Everest assured him. “Believe me, everyone’s a stranger when they first come to a town. Lots of people drift, looking for odd jobs. There’s always wood to be chopped, or fields to weed, or come harvest time crops to bring in. It’s still a big world out there, you’ll find your place.”

“I hope so.” He glanced down at himself. “If anyone will take me seriously, looking like this.”

The other two laughed. “We’ll get you cleaned up, not to worry. Can’t really share any clothes with you,” Don said, “they would look about as ridiculous as those do. But we’ll think of something. Worst comes to worst we head home and use a little of that silver we got to get you outfitted.”

“That may be what that girl wanted in the first place, that’s why she gave us so much.”

“Are you still on about that? There’s no way finding Lysanias was our goal. It’s coincidence, forget it!”

“If you say so.”

“Do you two want to get moving again?” Lysanias asked. “I’m going to be slowing you down, I’m sure. If you wanted to reach a certain point today...”

They both waved him off. “Not a problem lad. We’re really just wandering through, don’t have a timetable to meet at the moment.”

“With no real destination in mind, we can’t say we have to get anywhere in particular,” Everest added. “It’s earlier than we would have stopped, yes, but we can stay here and get some rest. Perhaps tomorrow you’ll be stronger and can see about leaving this cave.”

“To that end, let’s get set up!”

The two busied themselves getting out bedrolls and some odd lanterns, then put the rest of their gear nearby. Lysanias noticed Don had a sword and shield, both which were about as big as he was.

“You’re a swordsman?” he asked, pointing to the blade.

“Oh, did you think it should be an ax?” he asked with distaste.

“How could he?” Everest snapped. “You’re the only dwarf he’s ever met!”

“Right, sorry about that. Old argument.” He looked the sword over. “Actually not my preferred weapon, but you can’t very well swing a pole-arm around these cramped tunnels, now can you?” He chuckled.

“A what?”

“Pole-arm. Specifically a halberd.”

“Not familiar with that.”

“It’s an ax... On a long handle.” Everest said with a wink.

Does he have something in his eye?

“I guess that’s accurate. Look here, lad, you see how stumpy my arms are, right?” He held his arms out to his sides.

“Sure, what about it?”

“What about it, he says. Think lad, an ax uses this sort of motion.” He mimed an ax being swung. “The ax head would be about here.” He indicated a space just in front of him. “Who wants to be that close to the thing you’re swinging at? Especially someone like yourself, that has a much greater reach.”

“Okay, I can see that.”

“So, I have a sword and shield. This is actually a falchion, it’s thicker than a regular sword. I’m strong enough to handle it,” he bragged.

“Show him the shield, you’ll love this!”

"I'm getting there. Here lad, watch." He picked up the shield, which was basically just a standard shield, sized for a human. Don crouched behind it. "Now you see me, now you don't."

"Try hitting him with something now," Everest explained. "You would have to try reaching over him and striking downwards. Not all that easy, right?"

"No, I suppose it wouldn't be."

Don came back out from behind the shield and set it down again. "Now put an ax on a long handle, like he said, and put a sword at the very top so you can stab or swipe with it, and you've got your halberd. See?"

Lysanias nodded, understanding. "The extra reach keeps you safe while you poke or swipe at your opponent."

"He does get it, Everest."

"That he does, Don."

"But what about axes?"

"Oh, that," Don replied sourly. "Some dwarves do carry them. Claim it's some kind of 'hereditary weapon' or something. But that's crap, we came from earth elementals like I said before. They didn't carry axes around, they didn't need any weapons. I've tried to tell people reach is what wins battles but do they listen? Noooo, it's all 'show me your long rod, Don' or 'that's the funniest ax I've ever seen. Couldn't you afford a shorter handle?' Morons."

"So you can see why he prefers my company," Everest said. "I know it's not the length of the rod, it's how you use it."

"Lay off it!" Don said with a hearty laugh.

There's something between these two I'm missing...

"You want me to teach you how to use the sword, don't you?" Don shrewdly guessed.

"It was put here for a reason," he answered with a shrug. "I should probably get familiar with it. With all the creatures you say are out there, don't I need some way to defend myself?"

"I guess." He went over to the sword and looked it over. It was stuck, point first, down in the rock and cheerfully blazing away as if on fire. "Sword like that, though, you could probably sell it and get established in a town. Look at that gem that serves as the pommel. And I know smithing, what's the blade even made of? That's quality work right there. Plus the whole fire bit? It's not magical I can tell you that much. A relic like this, from the first age? It would be worth a few suns at least!"

"Suns?"

"Oh, gold. Gold coins are called suns."

"I see. And that's a lot?"

"A lot?! A farmer might make that in a whole year!"

"Wow. Still..."

"I know, it's a link to your past. I wouldn't sell it easily either. But it is an option. Still, you're right, you should at least get familiar with it."

"You'd be willing to teach me?"

"Eh, why not? Not much else to do when we stop for the 'night.' It'll pass the time. But you better get your strength back first."

"I will. Thanks."

The two continued their preparations, Don somehow filling up a pot with water in a swirl of light. He also made more food, a small mountain of it on a cloth they put down.

He can use magic! Maybe he can teach me some, that would be nice. I hate to ask now, but at least now I know how they managed to make it this far without carrying a wagonload of food. They just make what they need every day. Hence the spice too, it probably gets pretty boring eating the same stuff all the time.

Lysanias continued walking about the cave, getting a better sense of balance in

his new body and recovering his strength. The two did that funny hand gesture thing again and Everest said he would take first “watch.”

“First what?”

“Watch. Basically we don’t sleep at the same time,” Don explained. “We’ve not seen anything in these tunnels, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t stuff out there. The one night we don’t post a guard, that’s the night some evil spirt slaughters us in our sleep.”

“Why don’t you two sleep, I’ll stay up. I’m not tired yet.” He betrayed the lie by yawning again. “I’m not!” he argued with himself. “I’ve slept for thousands of years, how can I be tired? It’s just my body’s confused or something.”

“Either way, we can’t ask you to do that, lad.”

“Please, I want to be useful. You’re promising me all sorts of help. I have to repay you somehow.”

“Are you sure?” He nodded. The two looked at each other. “I don’t see the harm in it.”

“If he wants to do it, it’s okay with me.” The lamp was turned off, leaving just the flickering light of the sword to illuminate the pair. The two lay down next to each other, Don with his sword and shield in reach, Everest with some wicked looking knives he pulled from his belt. “Wake one of us when you start to get tired. Give a shout if you hear anything.”

“That’s not his snoring,” Everest clarified.

“Or his flatulence,” Don snipped right back.

Both laughed and rolled away from the sword’s light.

His what?

Nothing happened that night*, and in the morning Lysanias said he felt ready to at least attempt leaving the cave and doing some traveling. They said it was his call, he was the one who would be regretting it if he pushed too hard, and he was now standing before the sword. He held his hand up to it, closer and closer.

“It’s not warm, we checked that while we were discussing what to do with you,” Don assured him.

“Thanks for choosing to not just leave.”

“We wouldn’t have done that!” Everest insisted, despite his insistence, the day before, that they do just that.

The lamp was nearby, in case the fire went out when the sword was removed, and boldly Lysanias put his hands on the hilt and tried to lift it out. He strained and struggled, but didn’t manage it.

“Now what?” he asked, taking a step back and staring at the thing in frustration.

“Let your uncle Don have a turn,” said the dwarf, gently shoving him and nearly causing him to fall over. “Are you sure you’re okay for travel?”

“I feel fine, I just don’t have my sense of balance in this larger body yet, that’s all.”

“If you say so. Here we go.”

“How do you know it won’t burn you?” Everest asked, suspicious of this.

Don jerked his hands away. “I... Have no strong evidence one way or the other, I suppose. The sword was left for him I guess...”

“Let’s not put that to the test, all right? Lysanias, put your hands back on it and pull when I tell you.”

“Okay?” He wasn’t sure what was going to happen but he did as instructed.

When Everest said to, he yanked again with all his might and the blade popped up out of the ground with little trouble. He held it up and the flames continued, so at least that mystery was solved. The blade was heavy, but not as heavy as he would have imagined. He had no eye for design, but it looked impressive enough in his hand (he hoped).

“Ah, that worked,” Everest noted smugly. “Now we just need a sheath for it.”

“That reminds me!” Don brightened. “This was near the sword when we came in.”

He went back over to the platform Lysanias had been laying on and brought out another ward. "I stuck it here to keep it out of the way. Do you know what to do with it?"

"Give it here." He looked it over and nodded. "It's one I know. Watch." He tore it in half and out clattered a sheath, surprising the other two. The two halves burned out and were gone.

"Now that would be handy!" Don admitted.

"You know how to make something like that?" Everest asked, excited.

"It's one of the three I do know how to make. Why?"

"Can anyone use them? I mean if you made me one, could I stick something into it and get it out later? Can you put stuff bigger than that in?"

"Sure, anyone can use wards. And you can put bigger stuff in." *Of course, I'm not all that great at it. I probably wouldn't be able to manage much more than that, at the moment.*

The two seemed excited. "That's really useful," Don repeated. "I'd pay good money for something like that. I bet you could go into business just making them for people. Transporting goods around a city would never be the same!"

"You think?"

"Yeah." They both seemed to agree.

"Could you make one now?" Everest asked. "I'd love to watch the procedure!"

"Do you have paper, and ink, and a brush?"

Their faces fell. "No," they admitted.

"So I can't. Sorry. I mean I could use a stone and ink, I just need something to put the power into. But it'll burn up like you saw when you tear it, so I can't use anything you might care about, like cloth."

"Do you have to tear it?"

He shook his head. "You can use the release word. I just didn't know what it was for that one, so I just tore it. It's a safety feature. But releasing it will expend the power, and that will make whatever you used burn up. Not rock, obviously, but it would be worthless for further wards."

They looked suitably impressed.

If I really could make a living selling wards, I suppose I could practice before we get back to civilization. If I can find some ink, anyway. Not practicing it the other way. He shuddered. Guess my mom was right after all, nagging me to practice more. If the art really has been lost, it would be a unique thing and thus worth... Gold? I think that's what they said they used. Strange thing to use, but I guess it's useful so it too has value.

"Why put it inside a ward like that?" asked Everest, looking the sheath over and breaking his train of thought. It seemed a perfectly ordinary leather sheath.

"Hey, good point," agreed Don, standing there with him and looking it over. He looked up.

"I don't know. Maybe they thought the sheath might rot out?"

"And a piece of paper wouldn't?"

"Maybe it was special paper, I don't know!"

Don held up a hand. "No worries lad, that's a minor mystery in all this. Pop the sword in, see if the fire goes out."

But it didn't, at least as they pushed it in and out (at a medium pace) the flame flickered to life along the entire blade again. With it in the sheath the fire gathered around the hilt, and when held up served as a reasonable torch.

"Remarkable," breathed Everest.

With no other supplies to gather Lysanias was ready to go, and the other two picked up their camp. Lysanias looked around sadly, feeling as though he was truly leaving home and entering a hostile and unknown world.

Why didn't you come, dad? Was my last sight of you truly the last?

“Not to worry lad,” Don assured him with a slap on the back. “Stick with us and we’ll see you through.”

“Thanks.”

Meanwhile, half a continent away, two figures eat dinner in a dirty, run down inn. Both are hunched over their greasy fare, and “enjoying the local delicacy” would be somewhat less accurate than “choking down the terrible slop.” One is a man, clean shaven and dark haired, dressed for traveling. The other is a woman, face hidden beneath the hood of her cloak. She too is dressed for travel, and both wear sensible armor and carry swords quite visibly. They have other, older and more dangerous weapons on their person as well, but even if these had been shown openly the scattering of people here wouldn’t know their purpose. They wear stout boots, sensible leather pants, but the hint of a fine necklace adorns the slender neck of the woman. Even hooded, she seems to radiate confidence and power, and those eating near to them feel it better to pretend these two don’t even exist rather than start trouble. The man is the same, even scowling down at his overpriced stew none would even consider trying to pickpocket him or offer him a game of dice.

This is probably the healthiest option for everyone involved.

Suddenly the man lifts his head, looking far off into the distance as if his name had just been said in a crowded room.

“What’s up?” asked the woman, fork halfway to her mouth.

“It’s moving again,” the man replied, wonder apparent in his voice. “Moving through the world, I can’t believe it.”

“What is?” The woman’s senses were as keen as the man’s, but she didn’t feel anything out of the ordinary. Her eyes darted about the place, examining everyone here psychically, emotionally, studying their energy patterns, auras, even glimpsing into the future to see if something unexpected had crept up on them. She felt nothing out of the ordinary.

“Something I thought lost a long time ago. Something that was stolen from me by a dear friend.”

“Stolen? What, recently? You didn’t say you’d lost anything.”

The man barked a laugh. “Recent?” He shook his head. “No, it’s nothing recent. Why do you think I’m so surprised? Come on, we’re leaving.” He grabbed up his pack that had been set beside him.

“What, now?” The woman scowled at him. “We’re in the middle of dinner!”

“And is the meal so worth our attention?”

She pouted a bit. “Not really, but if we’re rushing off after some long lost artifact of yours it’s going to be trail food again. I honestly couldn’t say which was worse.” She looked at the unidentified meat on her fork, as if weighing her options. “I mean we came here for a purpose and now you want to rush off? We didn’t find who we were looking for. Didn’t even *start* looking. Come on!”

The man looked at her, and she coolly looked back. He sighed. “Very well. It’s been this long, I suppose we can spend the night here and start early tomorrow.”

“Very good,” she said, popping the meat into her mouth. The man sat down and after a moment picked up his own fork again. “So tell me about this stolen object that’s got you so worked up...”

*What do you think I am, some kind of sadist?

Talking Through the Tunnels

When: Later that day

Where: The tunnels

The group walked endlessly through the tunnel before them. Despite needing to stop and rest on occasion Lysanias felt he was keeping up well. He had no way to know how much, if any, he was holding the others back but they chatted and didn't seem too annoyed with him. He told them about life thousands of years ago, which they said wasn't that far off from life today, and they told him about the world he would emerge into.

"After all, people are people," explained Everest. "No matter what magic or science they have at their command, they want the same things."

"Material wealth, better life for their kids, seeing their enemies driven before them, that sort of thing," Don agreed with a chuckle. "It's the minority in power, or that are rich, or that know a lot of magic who get to have different lives than the rest of us."

"And it seems you have the same problems we did," Lysanias reasoned. "There's more variety in form, but it doesn't matter if it's a nephilim that wants to eat all the food in your village or orc raiders that want to carry off your livestock. You still have to defend it."

"Too true, lad."

"So how did you two meet?"

"Now that's a right gripping tale, that is!" Don assured him.

"Really?"

"Not so much," countered Everest. "The fact is I was his boss for a bit, that's all."

"Boss?"

"I worked for him," Don explained. "He's more into the business aspects of mining than the actual crawling through tunnels."

Lysanias shook his head. "I don't get it."

"To start at the beginning," began Everest, "I work by scouting out promising tunnels looking for mineral deposits or other valuables. Then I get the rights to mine from whoever owns them."

"If anyone does," put in Don. "Like these tunnels aren't owned by anyone, that we know about."

"Right. I give the owner a percentage of the profits and then I hire crews, such as dwarves like Don here, to do the actual mining."

Lysanias considered. "That doesn't seem fair."

"What do you mean?"

"They do all the work, and you get all the benefit?"

Don started laughing and laughing, and had to stop for a bit to recover. Everest glared at the two of them. "They don't do *all* the work," he said icily. "There's lots of paperwork to be done, and finding a buyer for the finished product, and keeping them fed, and making sure they don't get hurt."

"And sitting around watching, and maybe having an early lunch, and sneaking in a bit of afternoon delight." Don was wiggling his eyebrows.

"You're impossible! I do a lot. Even making sure I get a good price for what they've mined takes a lot of skill. I pay my people fairly too."

"He does pay pretty well," Don admitted. "Better than some jobs I've had over the years."

"Nice to hear you admit it. Anyway, we worked together and got along fairly well—"

"Fairly," he snorted.

"And when the forces of nature conspired against us, we decided to remain together."

"The what?"

"Mine ran dry," Don explained. "You know what the saddest thing to see is?"

Lysanias considered the question. "An empty mine?"

Don wacked him on the back and started laughing again. "We'll make a dwarf of you yet, my lad! He's a smart one, this guy. Empty mine, just as I would have said. Wouldn't I have said just that?"

Everest rolled his eyes but was smiling. "After I found a buyer for what the group pulled out of the mine we started looking for another stake. That's when the beastkin woman approached us."

"You could hear the coins rattling around in his head when she offered to show us some tunnels no one had found yet."

"That was just the sack of coins she had with her."

"I almost felt bad, taking that much from her, but she insisted."

"Said it could be dangerous, exploring tunnels like this."

"Is it?"

"To an extent, sure," Don replied. "Cave ins, worm attacks, stumbling into a hole."

"Been quiet though, so far. I asked Don here to come and see what sort of raw material we had to work with, and he agreed. Shame we gnomads seem to have lost the ability to sense mineral wealth like dwarves can."

"We need some reason for being around."

"That's a good a one as any, I suppose."

The grinned at each other.

"Have you found anything down here?"

Both shook their heads. "Just you my lad. Just you."

"Still, who knows how many tunnels we have yet to check? Just one that has some valuables in it will be worth our time. And we've already got a map to the location! We just note it down and come back with a team. Easy."

Lysanias had to admit, they had covered all the angles.

That "night" when they stopped Don drew his sword and told Lysanias to do the same. "Might as well get started," he figured. "I'll show you the basics. How to stand, and how to hold your sword."

"That is basic!"

"But necessary. Right, stand the way I do." Lysanias tried to copy his stance, and held his sword out in front of him.

Don looked him over critically. "I don't know about this," he said at last.

"What, did I do something wrong already?" He looked the dwarf up and down, trying to see where he had gone wrong.

"I fight with a shield, but for the moment I'm not sure you could handle both a sword and shield. The way you're holding that blade..."

"What do you mean?" Lysanias was a little hurt.

"I mean this, lad." His sword lashed out and smacked into the other, sending it spinning down the corridor. Everest leapt out of the way.

"Hey!" he admonished. "Watch it!"

"Sorry, didn't expect it to fly that far."

Lysanias rubbed his wrist. "Guess I still have a long way to go."

"It's barely been a day lad, give yourself some time." He went and picked the blade up, balancing it on his own. "Here you are."

"So is it hopeless?"

"No, we'll just have to adapt my teachings a little bit. I hold it in one hand, you need to hold it in two. Good thing the hilt is long enough."

"Like this?"

"That looks a little sturdier. Now we'll start with a simple slash. Keep your feet like this..."

And so they trained until Lysanias couldn't hold the sword up anymore. This wasn't actually all that long, but Don wasn't worried.

"Sword fighting is harder than people think," he explained. "Swinging around an iron bar? It's heavy, even as thin as swords are. You'll need to build up your endurance a bit as well as your strength. But you picked up the basic form, anyway."

"Thanks. Maybe you can teach me something else in the meantime?"

"Like what?"

"Magic! I'd love to learn some. Especially those spells you use to make food and water. If we got separated for some reason I'd need that to survive until I could find my way out of these tunnels."

Don shook his head sadly. "I tested you before you woke up, lad. You don't have the spark of magic in your soul. I can't teach you that. Sorry. You know I would, otherwise."

"Oh? How did you do that?"

"Two ways. I can sense magic in operation, and I have a spell to make magical things glow. It helps if I find a magical object, gives me a sense of how powerful the spell is on it."

"Maybe it wouldn't work while I was asleep?"

"Er, maybe... Tell you what, I'll cast it on myself and you at the same time, then you can see what I mean. How does that sound?"

"Fine."

"Very well." He brought his hands up and made a few gestures, and suddenly magical energy swirled around both men. There was a design at their feet, a circle of power that shone with symbols and arcane marks, and then the spell was cast. Lysanias looked down at himself and over at Don, who was glowing noticeably. He was not. "You see, lad? You have to have the spark, as we call it. My teaching you magic would be like teaching a fish to fly. It's just never going to work."

"Oh. I guess you would know better than me." *But that's weird, none of the people that studied magic that I heard of said anything about this 'spark.'* Okay there was only the one that lived nearby, but I'm pretty sure if I had wanted to study with him, my parents would have been fine with it. Well, maybe it's changed in the time since then. What with that chaos moon or whatever.

"Now if you want to learn about mining, or blacksmithing, or masonry, I'm your dwarf. Could even teach you to sing, I suppose. Or cook. But magic is off the table."

"Very well. I guess I'll just review the forms some more, without the sword."

"As you wish lad. You want first watch again?"

"Sounds okay to me."

Their journey continued in this way another two days, Lysanias watching the pair closely. Every night it seemed Don made food and water, and was always sniffing the air, saying he was checking for anything valuable. He showed his spells of turning larger rocks into dirt and simply carving a passage through stone, and Everest showed an ability he retained from his elemental parentage. That of simply willing earth or stone to move at his command. If the two found a passageway too narrow to traverse they simply used magic or earth moving to try and enlarge it. Sometimes they came to a branch and chose one way or the other seemingly at random. Twice they had to turn around and take the other, which was still leading them further into the tunnel system. (Or further out, Lysanias had no idea how far in or out they were, or even how deep they were.)

The pair was discussing which way to go and about to do their little hand game when Lysanias had a thought.

"Aren't you two supposed to be mapping these tunnels out?" he asked.

"We are," insisted Everest, confused. "What gave you the idea we aren't?"

"You're not making any notes, or marking anything down. Shouldn't you at least write 'passageway continued three hundred paces before splitting off left and right, we took the right fork.' Something? You can't be memorizing the entire route!"

The two laughed, and Lysanias looked annoyed.

"Not your fault, lad. We didn't think to mention it." From his pack he started unfolding a large sheet of paper.

"I thought you said you didn't have any paper!" he protested.

"This one's special. Look here." He got it unfolded and set it on the ground, so Lysanias brought the sword closer so he could see it. "Here's the tunnel we're in now. Here's where we found you."

And indeed, in good detail there seemed to be a drawing of the tunnels just as they had been seen by the group.

"I've heard of a spell to do this," Don told him. "But I don't know how this one keeps working. Usually magic is a bit more flighty than that."

"Flighty?"

"That's right. Like if you wanted to, I don't know, hide from your enemies who were magically searching for you. You cast a spell to hide your movements, right? But you request the magic for the time you're on the road. So you all start walking and decide to sit down and eat lunch. Boom! The magic leaves because you've changed what you were doing. So you recast it, to get you through lunch. Then you recast it again when you get up to start walking again."

"Sounds somewhat inconvenient. Plus if these enemies of yours happen to catch you between castings..."

"True. But his map just keeps updating. It's not imbued, I can tell that much. That's a way to more permanently put magic into an item," he explained. *Oh, it's like the sword. The magic equivalent of making an object with power in it.*

"So she had lots of coinage, and strange magic?"

"Talked a bit funny, too. She was on odd duck. Said she would find us when the job was done. I paid the kind of money she did, I would want a more specific meeting place and time to get the map and know the job was done."

"Duck? I thought you said she was a fox."

"That's just an expression, lad. She was a fox, not an actual duck. Never seen a duck beastkin, actually."

"Oh." A thought struck him. "So when you do magic, are you really doing magic?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Hear me out. I can call spirits, right? Or I could, I haven't tried here. Anyway, I do a chant and the spirit of the animal comes to help me. Magic could be similar. When you do a 'spell' you're really calling a magical 'spirit' so to speak, that takes things literally. They hang around doing what you asked, but as soon as the task changes, this 'spirit' decides they did what you asked and leaves again."

The two considered, Don stroking his beard as he did. "An interesting theory," Everest said at last. "Can't prove it one way or the other I'm afraid."

"What else could it be?" Lysanias protested. "What's making that light? Those circles? What is magic really?"

"That's a question people have been asking since the moon showed up," Don told him. "You answer that one, and you're set for life."

"Oh. Well, never mind."

"It's been never minded," Everest said, helping to fold the map up again.

"We are professionals, you know?"

The tunnels proved their danger the next day.

The group was watching Don widen a section of tunnel with magic when a rumbling started.

"Look out, lad!" Don cried, shoving him. Everest also dodged free, but both

watched in horror as the cave ceiling collapsed atop Don. Dust and dirt flew everywhere, filling the passageway and making both turn away, coughing. As the dust cleared Everest flew to where Don's arm was sticking out of the rubble.

"Help me!" he commanded, starting to dig his friend out by willing the dirt out of the way.

Mountain, we need your help now, Lysanias thought internally. Come to me in my time of need.

I hear, I come, the spirit of the mountain replied. From inside Lysanias' body stepped the physical manifestation of his spirit, taking the form of a mountain. The form didn't have a clear head, just a body that seemed to come to a point like a tall mountain. But it did have arms and legs, like a person, and Lysanias was struck by the resemblance to his new friend Everest. He also breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't tried anything up to this point, not knowing if he was strong enough or if what he could do before would even still work in this new world he found himself in. He managed to get it out about a third of the time on the first try, and wondered if the type of task he had in mind could help. *We're all tied to the earth, in some way. Is that more than a coincidence?*

Lysanias was struck by a sudden longing for the home he would never see again. He remembered the day the woman close to the spirits came and all the kids of the village came out to hear her stories. She spoke of the animals of the earth, and how their spirits could give aid when called upon. That each person had a bit of the animal spirit inside them, which could show a lot about them. She showed her *projection*, the animal part of her soul that could come out and guide her. It had been a dark spirit, that of the raven, which the woman had said was a trickster but a teacher as well. Naturally everyone wanted to learn their inner spirit's name and manifestation, and she patiently showed them what to do. His was mountain, representing the pinnacle of achievement. One of his best friends, a girl named Esther, got ram, and was told that represented seeking higher states of being. (And being stubborn) It lived in the mountains so he had felt particularly close to her that day.

But now his spirit could help his friend, and he commanded it to help dig him out.

"You think he's okay?"

"Dwarves are tough, and his shield was strapped to his back. That should have helped- what is moving that dirt?"

"My mountain spirit. I called it out to help."

"What mountain spirit?" Everest was looking right at it.

"It's right there. Can't you see it?"

"I just see you."

"Worry about that later."

"I guess."

They dug Don out as much as they were able, but there was a huge rock pinning him and he seemed to be unconscious. Breathing, but they couldn't wake him up.

"He could use magic to get himself out," Everest complained. "How are we going to move that?"

Lysanias shook his head. "My spirit only has the strength I do, so it's as weak as I am. But I bet we could all move it, together, if we learned how to move the earth like you do!"

"Lysanias, that's just something I can do. It's part of my heritage."

He shook his head. "You don't get it. I can learn it, I'm sure of it. I've been watching you use it for days. I've almost got it. Tell me what you do and let me try. It's the only way to get him out of there. Mountain can't change size here, he'll bring more of the tunnel down on us. Trust me!"

Everest looked back and forth between Lysanias and his friend. "We have to do something. You say you can do it, fine. It's just commanding the earth to move, willing it to happen."

Lysanias asked some relevant questions, and Everest answered them. "You almost sound as if you do understand."

"Come on, let's try it. It's willpower, right? I'll put as much energy as I can into my will, I learned that too. We can do it!"

"On three then."

"Wait! Mountain spirit, do you have it?" The figure of rock nodded, and turned to the rock. *Of course, it is my soul, so anything I learn it should be able to do too.* "On three then."

"One. Two. Three!"

While Everest had been counting, Lysanias and his mountain spirit projection were gathering their energy for the task ahead. He had learned how to sense and manipulate the energy of life from his mother, which could allow him to put more effort into something. This particular ability seemed to rely just on willpower, and his will, he had always been told, was fairly strong.

All three mentally ordered the rock to move, to shift, to lift off their friend so he could be rescued. Slowly and ponderously the rock moved.

“Quick, grab him,” ordered Everest, taking one of his arms. Lysanias grabbed the other and they heaved, getting him out from under the rock. His shield looked cracked, and after he was free the rock crashed down, no longer held up by supernatural force. Lysanias was fairly pleased with himself, and nodded his thanks to the spirit that had aided him. He felt the spirit had done better lifting the rock than he had, which was only to be expected with him being an earth spirit.

“Please be alive!” Everest pleaded, taking the broken shield and pack off his friend’s back. He rolled Don over and tore his shirt open. “He’s breathing!” Lysanias didn’t really know anything about dwarves, or first aid, but even he could see the ugly bruising on Don’s chest. “I think his ribs are broken, what are we going to do?”

“No help for it, I guess. Hand me your knife.”

“What? I mean to wake him up and get him someplace we can heal him. Not put him out of his misery!”

“What? No, I’m going to heal him. But I need your knife. Come on, he’s bleeding... Internally or something, right?”

Everest once again looked between his friend and this strange man they had rescued, and decided he had no choice but to trust one more time. He handed the knife over.

Hoped I never had to do this. I hate cutting myself. At least my mom insisted I learn this aspect of warding, in case I was caught without any. Thanks mom. He slashed his left hand open and dropped the knife.

“What are you doing?” Everest gasped. Lysanias ignored him, trying to recall how exactly this worked. He swirled his finger through the blood, then traced a design on Don’s chest. Putting in spiritual power the blood suddenly burned bright blue and Everest gasped and tried to pull Lysanias away. The mountain spirit, hovering nearby and watching with interest stepped between them, and Everest was held back, flailing his arms and feeling that he couldn’t move forward. “Stop, what are you doing?” he cried, feeling betrayed and unable to understand what was holding him back. All he could see was his friend being consumed by fire, perhaps what this strange man had wanted all along and now was finally able to enact.

“I’m healing him,” Lysanias snapped, watching closely to see if more blood would be needed. It would mean he had to cut himself again, but that was a small price to pay. The blood ward did its job, healing and shrinking the bruising to Don’s chest. “I think only one will be needed.”

“One?” Everest asked, not understanding. The blue fire went out and Don’s breathing eased. The blood was gone. “What in the world?” Everest stared, not understanding what was going on, but he could see Don was doing better. Both waited with anticipation to see if he would come around.

“What hit me?” Don asked after a moment. He groaned and opened his eyes.

“You’re okay?!” exclaimed Everest, and the mountain spirit let him pass so he fell to his knees before his friend.

“Of course. I’m a dwarf aren’t I?” he weakly asked.

“Oh Don, I thought I had lost you!” He hugged his friend.

“Ow, ow. Ease up. Let’s not get all weepy. Am I seeing double, or did you find someone else down here to help?”

“What?” Everest looked behind him where Don was looking. He looked back. “There’s nothing there.”

“There is,” Don insisted.

“I told you,” Lysanias said a bit smugly. “The mountain spirit. I don’t know why you can’t see it.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Some time later Don was sitting up and drinking some water, feeling better. The mountain spirit was gone, faded back into Lysanias’ soul. “Still a bit sore, of course,” he said. “But if you have to cut yourself to do more, I’ll live.”

“Here, let me see what we have to bandage that,” Everest offered, feeling odd towards Lysanias because he had done exactly what he said he would do, but not understanding how. He was grateful and suspicious, an odd combination. And guilty for being suspicious towards someone who had only been helpful, but resentful because Don got into this whole mess saving him.

Don went on. “Thanks for saving my life, and everything. Both of you. Blasted tunnel, I was careless, having nothing happen for so long.”

“Sure thing. Sorry about your shield,” Lysanias said.

“That I can repair no problem. When we get back I might want to look into some healing magic though. I do know how to cast sun spells after all, and that’s all about healing.”

“Here.” Everest started wrapping Lysanias’ left hand with a cloth. “Not the best place to be wounded, a dirty tunnel like this. If you feel stiff or anything, let us know.”

“Stiff?”

“Yeah, it means you’re dying.”

“Oh.”

“And as for you,” he said to Don. “You should teach him what magic you know. Moving that rock would have been easier if he could have turned it into dirt.”

“You hit your head or something? I already explained-”

“Don’t you see, he picked up my ability to move the earth! Show him, Lysanias.”

He shrugged and selected a smaller stone, willing it into his hand.

“Now doesn’t that beat all. How’d you do that?”

“Watching him. Same way I learned to call out my mountain spirit or make wards. An angel taught someone years before I was born, and that person taught me. Is that really so strange?”

“It really is,” Everest agreed. “The abilities of most people are fairly limited. Most people don’t even have any special powers. Magic is the most common nowadays, even that appears in only a fraction of the population. In my readings I’ve come across reports of people able to turn lead into gold or tell the future. But they couldn’t usually do both. Or that and magic.”

“Oh, I can do that! Don’t even need lead!” Lysanias said excitedly. He concentrated on the stone in his hand and it turned shiny and shrank. The two stared at the now golden lump in his hand. “And you guys use coins, right? Just as second.” He further concentrated and the lump became a thick disk. He flipped it to Don.

“This is gold, lad!” His eyes were wide.

“Yeah. Can’t manage much more than a stone that size with any reliability, of course. But it was fun turning things into other things back... Well, you know.”

Don was turning the coin over and over in his hand. “And you were worried about getting along in the world?”

“Oh, I guess I didn’t think of it that way.” He looked down, somewhat embarrassed. “Actually, it’s a lot harder but I can do healing that way too. I didn’t even

think of it. Probably wouldn't have managed your ribs, but if you want me to see about healing you the rest of way?"

"Go ahead lad, you're just full of surprises today. This I have to see."

So Lysanias put his hand on Don's chest and concentrated, willing him healed the rest of the way. This type of healing was rather slow, but he managed it nicely. That done he focused on his hand and slowly that wound sealed together as well. He took the cloth off and scowled at the faint line of newly grown skin.

"Did you do it, lad?"

He held the hand up for Don to see, and he nodded. "So you did. What a wonder, but why are you scowling so?"

"It was too easy," he admitted.

"Too... What?"

"Easy. Before I woke up I might have had to try two or three times to do any of that. But this time it all worked out the first time. I don't get it."

Don was getting up by this time, closed his shirt, and went into a series of stretches. "How does it work?" he asked. "Like moving the rock? Willing it to happen?"

"Not exactly. It's more like feeling out the item you want to change. Manipulating the tiny pieces that make it up to become something else. Basically forcing one pattern into another I've felt before. Remembering one pattern to make it turn into another, deciding how they're different, what needs to change. Do you understand?"

"I think so. The smarter you are the easier it should be, right?" He nodded, satisfied he was fine, and went over to his shield. He picked up the pieces and started looking them over.

"Maybe?"

"You think something happened to you while you slept?" Everest asked, taking the cloth back.

"But what? I couldn't exactly practice while asleep!"

Everest looked thoughtful. "I suppose there is one explanation," he offered.

"What's that?"

"You know how blind people start to hear better to compensate?"

"What's 'blind people?'"

"People who can't see."

"Why wouldn't they be able to see?"

"Maybe they were born that way. Or there was an accident and they... The point is, they get better hearing okay?"

"Sure, if you say so."

"What if something like that happened to you? Your body couldn't move, so while you grew physically weaker you got smarter instead."

"Is that possible?"

"I just watched you learn something you shouldn't be able to, heal two different ways, and supposedly call out a mountain spirit. I have no idea what's possible, apparently."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." His eyes narrowed. "What else can you do?"

"Not much else. I know how to call upon the spirit of the dragonfly. I can analyze material and change its nature or shape, and I can make wards."

"Analyze material, eh? Close your eyes a second," Don requested.

"Okay?"

Don handed him a coin from his pouch. "What metal is this made of, lad?"

"It takes a little while, let me see." He stood, running his hands over the coin. "I've felt this metal before, it's silver," he said at last, fairly confident. "Stuff I haven't worked with would be harder to tell."

"That's right lad, it is silver. You are a handy guy to have around, aren't you?"

"Am I?" He opened his eyes and looked at the coin. It had a crescent moon

stamped on one side and the head of some odd creature on the other. He handed it back.

"Too right. You want to learn magic, tonight we can see if you can learn magic."

"Really?" Lysanias grinned.

"Why not? Shouldn't be any different than anything else you've learned. I'll be impressed if you can manage it, but maybe things worked differently for people back then. How are we to know until we try?"

"Sounds like something I would say. Why would you need magic to make food or water though?" asked Everest. "Couldn't you just turn rocks into bread? Dirt into water?"

"Turning a solid thing into water is harder, but maybe. Some sort of oil into water would be easier than something solid. Rock into bread would be possible. I just thought magic might be easier, and it was something I didn't know."

"You're not suddenly against learning are you?" Don teased him.

"No, just curious. You okay?"

"For what I've just gone through, I feel great. Pay attention lad, I'm going to fix my shield. This is a pretty advanced spell, far harder than just making water, but you might get something out of it." He gestured and spoke, making magical energy surround the broken shield. It flowed together and he picked it up, turning it this way and that to make sure it was okay.

"Very nice," he admitted.

"But you could have done the same, right?" Everest asked.

"It would wear me out. It takes my own spiritual energy to force a physical change in something. Repairing that sort of damage might have taken everything I had, especially now."

"So it might still be worth learning. Interesting. But now for the more immediate problem."

"This mess," agreed Don, looking the now destroyed hallway over.

"This mess," he agreed.

The group eventually agreed it was best not to take more chances in this direction and headed back a bit. Don then used his magic to open a passage to the right in the stone. Then turn to the left, make a longer tunnel, then left again, intersecting the original tunnel.

"And your magical map will show that?" Lysanias asked.

"Every step we take!" agreed Don.

That night when the group stopped, as promised, Don offered to tell Lysanias about magic.

"We'll start with the easiest spells I know," he told him. "Just in case. You get magic wrong and it gets angry. Trying to set someone on fire, for instance, may instead set you on fire."

"Really?"

"Really. So take your time and do what I do."

Don started him off with the *Time* spell, which simply told the caster the current time. (That's how they knew when to stop and eat lunch, for instance, without the sun.)

"Now this is a *Saturn* spell," he explained. "As we group each type of magic into a celestial body based on how it's cast. Saturn spells deal with learning, knowing things. Sun spells deal with healing, or light, as I may have mentioned before."

What's a Saturn? He's talking about the sun and moon, maybe it's something further out there? Wait, moon... "So what about that new moon you guys have?"

"Don't even think about it," cautioned Don. "People that start trying to do spells in that school of magic tend to go nuts in the end."

"Nuts? They turn into chestnuts or something? What sense does that make?"

"No lad, I mean they go mad. Insane. Loopy. Off their rocker. Off the deep end."

You aren't getting any of this, are you?"

"No, I have no idea what you're saying."

"Basically they lose their reason," Everest put in. "Maybe they think they're a horse now. Or they talk to people that are only in their minds. Or another personality takes them over, or they just vanish and are never heard from again."

"Let's not do anything with that moon."

"Good lad! The normal one is fine, by the way. But I don't know any spells from that school, so it makes no difference. Back to Saturn. This type of magic requires study and exactness in the hand movements and phrases. Doing a Sun spell is similar, but the gestures are more complex. Mars, that deals with fire and combat spells, needs forceful movements and great strength to force magic to do what you want. You see what I'm getting at here?"

"Each of the schools of magic is cast differently, and spells relate to each other in a school. So you won't set fire to someone trying to cast a Saturn spell, so don't try."

"That's about the size of it. Now let's see if you can learn some simple hand gestures for this time spell."

The two went over and over it, but Don wanted him to practice more before he told him the words and how to actually draw magic from the environment. "You can practice as we walk tomorrow," he said, "but you should be able to do it tomorrow or the next day."

"Two days?" Lysanias whined.

"That's right lad. Like I said, it's not something to fool around with. Even a spell as minor as this. We don't even know if you can do magic, let's not take any risks. For now let's go through the sword forms again."

"Okay!" he brightened.

"Tell me, are you a particularly strong magic user?" Lysanias asked as they were eating dinner that night.

"Strong?"

"Yeah, strong. Is your magic particularly strong when compared to others?"

"You mean skilled, I get it. I'm average I guess? Really don't have any way to measure that. I tend to take all the time I can when casting spells, so I don't backfire it. Not really sure how I would tell how skilled I was, short of another person with the same spell trying it and trying to get it faster and faster than they did until we either backfired or couldn't get it faster any more. That would show if one of us was more skilled than the other."

"Skilled?"

"Sure lad. Tell me, imagine there was a large rock sitting right here. Could you lift it?"

"Unless it's smaller than this," he indicated a small space with his hands, "probably not."

"Exactly. But you could lift rocks until you got stronger, right?"

"Sure. The muscles in my arms would get bigger, right?"

"Right. Now if you knew a spell to magically lift something, you could use that. But there's no magic muscle. You can't get more skilled at picking up rocks, you can only get stronger and lifting the rock is secondary to that. But can one magic user be more skilled than other? And then lift more weight? Sure. All that finger wiggling we have to do is manipulating magic somehow. You do it more perfectly than another person and you get a better result."

"Normally, people either have magic or they don't," added Everest. "Present company excluded, if you can do magic, you can do magic. No one just automatically casts spells because their magic is 'stronger.' Everybody has to study how to manipulate magic, no matter how they do it."

“There’s different ways?”

“A couple. There’s people that do spells through weapons. There’s natural magicians who use their body’s energy like you said you do when manipulating things to change them into other stuff. I just pull magic from all around me as near as we’ve figured it, they change their own internal energy into magic somehow. They’re more rare than my type. They can learn spells faster than I can, and make up for lack of skill with energy, but their spells are still no stronger. Naturally a very studied mage of that type can beat my type every time because they have both skill and energy to put into magic. I suppose you could call that magical strength? If one person of that type could put more energy than another of that type? But neither would be ‘stronger’ in the sense of rock lifting. I’ve heard rumors of people on the surface that can use crystals to manipulate magical energies, but I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“And of course those that pray, and get magic from either holy or demonic sources,” added Everest.

“Yeah, holy,” Lysanias said sarcastically. If he had known what air quotes were he would have been using them.

“Sure. Won’t find much of that down here, but holy magicians exist. Or just people that channel holy power directly. We’re both descended from demons, so we don’t do a lot of worship, but we know it exists. What’s the problem?”

“I just question how you can term that power ‘holy’ when you’ve got a man sitting in front of you from a time when the Allfather said ‘you know, I’m going to wipe out everything in a flood. That sounds like a good time.’ Call me a little bitter, but those of us, like myself, that hadn’t even been alive that long were punished along with those that had been alive hundreds of years. What did we do to deserve that?”

“I don’t have an answer for you lad,” Don admitted. “And I certainly understand why you might feel that way. I would, if I was in your place, it’s only natural. But you survived, maybe others did too.” *As people from that time didn’t seem to die of old age, apparently. And could learn to use all sorts of abilities? Just who are you, lad? Why were you really sealed away down here?* “You might find some if you look.”

“Maybe,” he grumped. “But it still wasn’t fair.”

And neither man had an answer for that.

As The Worm Turns

When: Several Days Later

Where: Tunnels (sorry)

Lysanias wasn't really sure how many days had passed, or even if the days were the same length as he remembered thanks to the chaos moon. And while trudging through the tunnels was monotonous, both Don and Lysanias now had something to talk about. Everest, being interested in learning on a general level also had good questions and helped to clarify points that Lysanias wasn't getting. All in all the group walked the tunnels in good spirits, because honestly the dwarf and gnomad had been getting on each other's nerves a bit lately, so having Lysanias around was a breath of fresh air. Having the cheery flames from Lysanias' sword seemed to help their mood too, as their lantern emitted a cold, harsh light that was somewhat hard on the eyes. There was just something about firelight that improved people's moods. Even when those people were a dwarf and a gnomad.

"Found it in a ruin," Don had explained when Lysanias asked about it one night. "Doesn't seem to need any sort of fuel, and it's bright enough. Personally I think it's a surviving artifact from before the arrival of the chaos moon, given it's not magical at all. They made a lot of wonders in those days, and totally without magic. Imagine it! Didn't even believe in it, from what Everest has read."

"That's right," he agreed. "Apparently it was virtually unknown, being constrained to certain demons or angels, and their direct agents. Oh, there was some supernatural power in the world, like what you can do, but so little as to be nearly non-existent."

Probably lost in the flood. Wonder if I could start teaching what I know to people? Maybe work out how to do some of the things I saw done, teach that too. "How did people get by?"

"Well enough, if their ruins say anything about them. They built tall, lad, and some of their buildings survive to this day. Maybe you'll see once we're out of these stupid tunnels. I mean imagine the tallest thing you've ever seen, twenty or more paces to a side, lit with lamps like this one from within. All glass and metal, rising to the sky. It must have been quite a sight to see when the streets were lined with the things."

"I can hardly imagine it."

They had also talked about magic.

"You can actually sense magic?" Lysanias had asked when it was apparent his motions and speaking were not actually producing any magical effect whatsoever. "I can sense life energy, is that the same thing?"

"Not exactly, lad. Magic is independent of life, just ask any remnant you see."

"Remnant?"

"Machines from the old world, like the lamp," Everest explained. "But these walk around and talk, and look somewhat like people. I've heard rumors of these 'mechanical men' doing magic, but I've never met one."

"Bah!" Don scoffed. "It's just old world stuff. Most people wouldn't know the difference. Show them the lamp and a light spell, and they couldn't say which was more 'magical' than the other. So some mechanical man does a wonder or two and ignorant people exclaim it's magic. But any actual magic user would tell you it wasn't."

"I suppose you're right."

"Anyway..."

"Right lad, back to the lesson. I can sense magic, and those spell casters like myself draw the magic of their environment into their spells."

"You've mentioned that, the other type turn their own internal energies into magic, right?"

“That’s right. Well, now that I’m fairly certain you won’t backfire the water making spell and suck all the moisture out of your own body, I’ll teach you to sense magic. That way you can hook into some, shape it, and finally cast your first spell.” He paused. “If you can, that is.”

“I’m pretty sure I can.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Everest admitted.

It was a bit difficult to carry on lengthy conversations in these tunnels just because only two people could walk side by side due to their very nature. Most tunnels you might want to explore feature a smooth, flat bottom with a curved top. Due to gravity, I guess, or just people coming along and smoothing it down so it’s easier to walk on. Other options included an uneven ceiling full of jagged rocks pointed down, or a ceiling so high up you can hardly see it. This tunnel, by contrast, was perfectly round and smooth, like a giant worm had simply dissolved the rock in front of it leaving a giant circle. This made walking tricky if you were trying to walk side by side because your one leg would be at an angle relative to the other leg. So typically it was Don and Lysanias in the lead talking, with Everest trailing behind them. When one or the other in the front got tired of their unknowing emulation of the ministry of funny walks, they switched.

The circular nature of the cave wasn’t terribly important, except in passing. But after two days of this Lysanias grew quite annoyed and asked why the cave was that shape, and so uniform in appearance.

“Worms,” was the answer. “Huge, massive worms that tunnel through the earth in search of food.”

This has suddenly become important because after a few days of travel, one of those very worms was close enough to sense prey moving about and started heading in a direction to get in front of them. So it should be no surprise to you that this worm burst into the tunnel ahead of our little band of tunnel explorers, because now you know what Lysanias knows. That worms made these tunnels, and there one is, all teeth and... mostly just teeth. You might think the group would be taken by surprise by the arrival of a worm nearly 3 meters tall, but the conversation seconds before went something like this:

“Something’s coming,” Lysanias suddenly exclaimed, stopping in his tracks.

“What’s this, lad?”

“I can feel the life energy of something coming this way.”

“Which way?” Everest asked, alarmed.

He pointed. “Off to the right.”

Don and Everest shared a look and both put their hands down to that side of the cave. There was a moment of silence. “I don’t feel anything,” admitted Don, and Everest shook his head. “Neither do I.”

“I’m telling you, something is coming!”

“I believe you lad.” Don drew his sword and cast a spell onto it, then got his shield unhooked from his pack.

“I think you’re imagining it,” Everest scoffed. “You’re starting to get a little crazy from the tunnel. There’s no shame in it, happens to the best of us.”

“You can stand in front of me then,” he allowed, also drawing his sword and taking it in two hands. Fire blazed up the length of the blade, lighting the tunnel up more.

“I’m telling you, there’s nothing-”

There was a horrendous crash and tearing of rock as a giant rockworm tore through the wall of the passageway in front of the group and turned towards them.

“Oh crap it’s a worm!” he finished, pulling his daggers out. “You were right!”

What are those going to do against that? Lysanias wondered. What is my sword going to do against it?

The worm completely blocked the tunnel in front of them as it slithered forward, mouth open. This seemed a good strategy, and one that whales used all the time. Simply open your mouth, move forward, and let the food that was many times smaller than you simply fall inside. The trio had nowhere to run, the passageway behind them was straight for at least several kilometers. Nor could they dodge to the side because the worm before them took up the entire tunnel. They had to fight and win. The mouth opened like a flower, with four flaps of skin peeling back to reveal rows and rows of razor sharp teeth.

"Is that spirit of yours out yet?" Don called to Lysanias. "I bet it wouldn't be able to hurt something like that!"

Of course. I should have been trying to call it out this whole time. Mountain spirit, hear my call!

Don knew the only way to defeat such a beast would be to use its own strength against it. Tossing his shield aside he gripped his sword in both hands, point downward. He leapt forward, screaming a battle cry, and came dangerously close to the open maw that was threatening to engulf them all. Holding it high he slammed it into the ground, trying to pin one of the mouth flaps to the floor of the cave. He hoped to pierce through and drive the sword into the ground, thus making the worm slice itself open as it continued forward. Several things worked in his favor during this endeavor; He was attacking the softer inner flesh of the mouth and not the more armored, outer part. He was a dwarf, and twice as strong as Lysanias currently plus the extra effort he was putting in. He was lower to the ground as well, making the strike more forceful. Finally the spell he had cast magically sharpened the blade allowing it to pierce the skin of the creature and drive into the rock below.

"Oh great, now you have no weapon at all," moaned Everest as Don jumped back, leaving his blade behind.

"Up to you lads now!" Don agreed.

Lysanias waited to hear back from the mountain spirit, and see it forming before him. No such luck. The worm continued forward and Don kept backpedaling, trying to stay in front of it. "Any time now lads!"

Everest concentrated, hands making a crushing gesture before him. The worm was slowed as the tunnel constricted around it, but not stopped. "It's still coming, I can't hold it back!" he shouted.

The worm lunged forward at Don and caught his leg, making him cry out and go down, his leg nearly severed. "Don!" both shouted, horrified.

Please, mountain spirit, my life and the life of my companions is in danger. I hear you. My aid is yours.

The mountain spirit appeared in the mouth of the beast, Lysanias hoping it could at least keep that horrible maw from closing down upon his friend. But he needn't have worried. "Grab on!" shouted Everest, retargeting his ability to move rock to a section of stone that had broken off in the scuffle. It shot over to Don who grabbed it, and it pulled him down the tunnel a ways, trailing blood.

Have to finish this quickly somehow, go heal him before he bleeds to death.

The worm now went for the nearest person, Lysanias, tearing itself up a little more on the sword as it was too stupid to even realize it was there. He slashed at it, hoping the flames would discourage it. Amazingly he knocked the mouth part away from himself, putting in all the effort he could manage on the effort.

His spirit projection now utilized its special ability to grow to match the worm's size and started trying to hold it back.

"Nice one!" called Everest.

"It's still coming!"

"Tell me something I don't know!"

All right, Don had the right idea. Let's see if it likes this. He put his hand on the

wall of the cave to his right and concentrated. He misjudged the material and whatever he was trying fizzled.

Whoops. I know mom, I should have practiced more. Didn't think I'd be dodging a stupid worm-

He slashed with the sword again as the monstrous mouth made murderous advances towards his most precious parts, and again managed it despite doing this left handed. *I can't keep this up. At least my spirit is keeping it from bringing its full strength to bear against us. But we need to do more damage.*

Everest tried constricting the passageway again, but hardly managed anything this time because the worm hardly noticed. It did notice something it couldn't even sense trying to tear off one of its mouth "petals". It stopped and tried biting down, figuring maybe it had gotten a rock in its mouth or something. It managed to compact the spirit down who still didn't have the strength to match the worm, but it was as tall as the worm was. There was no way the worm could swallow it, and just succeeded in blunting its teeth on the spirit's invulnerability. (The teeth would have smashed the spirit up otherwise, they were that sharp despite the spirit being essentially made of rock.)

Lysanias now tried again, this time judging the material correctly and aiming for the body instead of the mouth, which was now closed and trying to grind up his spirit. Spikes shot out of the wall, impacting the body of the worm but not as deeply as he had hoped. But Everest saw what he was doing and aided him, driving them deeper into the worm's body after snapping them off the walls. Even as stupid as the creature was, and it was little more intelligent than a rock, it realized that maybe this food wasn't quite worth it. It dove into the earth, shooting forward and smashing the tunnels behind itself, collapsing them in a cloud of dust. Lysanias felt his spirit vanish as it got too far away from him, and knew the worm was not circling around because the sense of its energy rapidly retreated.

"Help him!" pleaded Everest, blood pooling around Don's leg. He looked pale and was hardly breathing.

"Give me your knife!"

"Can't you just-"

"No! He's too badly hurt, I don't want to waste time trying to- I'll explain later!"

"Here." Everest handed over his knife and Lysanias wasted no time. He slashed his hand as Everest cut away the tattered remains of his pant leg. Again the blue fire burned, but Lysanias knew it wasn't enough. He cut his lower arm and gathered more blood, again making the symbols on Don's leg, then his upper arm.

"How much more?" Everest asked, wondering if he was trading the life of one of his companions for the other.

"I think I can handle it now," he answered, now starting to knit the flesh back together as best he could.

Then he blacked out.

When he came to he found himself being carried by Everest next to a limping Don, both of whom exclaimed that he was awake.

"What happened?" he managed.

"You saved me," Don replied gruffly. "Again. Quite a debt I'm building up, Lysanias."

"We lived then. That's good."

"Are you okay?" asked Everest, obviously concerned. "We tried to patch you up as best we could. The knife wounds weren't deep, so hopefully you can take care of them now that you're awake?"

He looked himself over, and again some rough bandages were applied to his cuts. "I'll try it in a little while. I can walk though." He got set down and staggered a little.

"Are you sure?" Don asked.

"I'll be fine. What happened to the worm?" He looked down the tunnel and felt out with his senses.

"Got away, with Don's sword!" Everest answered a bit angrily.

He shrugged. "It seemed to work."

"How can you even say that? All it did was almost get you killed."

"No, he's right," Lysanias told them, yawning. "I saw, the sword was cutting the worm a little as it went forward. I don't think it was very bright. It got knocked over in the end though. Probably tumbled down the..." He yawned again. "Down the escape tunnel it made."

"You're exhausted, let's stop for now," suggested Don. "And in case it's not clear? Thank you. *You* drove that thing off, I hardly did anything back there. But myself almost killed."

"The fire did, maybe. I got lucky. Thank my parents, who put the sword there."

"Lucky? Ha! You stood your ground, and Everest here told me about what your spirit did. Nearly getting swallowed?"

He shook his head. "That was only a minor risk. I figured it wouldn't be able to hurt a spiritual form. Seems I was right."

"Still. You're okay in my book, lad. I think it's time to break out that spice, have a bit of a celebratory meal. We survived a worm attack!"

"I suppose," agreed Everest. "It doesn't happen every day."

Later, after the group had eaten and rested, Lysanias put himself back together and did the best he could fixing Don's pants.

"Why can't you do yours the same way?" he asked, as the fabric went back together.

"I can't make something from nothing," he explained. "And this material is thin enough as it is. Trying to stretch it out further would only break it just moving my arms or legs."

"Ah!" He looked as though he was understanding something and pulled the gold coin out of his pouch. "That's why the rock shrunk."

"Exactly. Lead is best because it doesn't change shape all that much. Trying to turn feathers into gold only gets you gold dust."

"What about healing him before?" Everest asked. "Why did you need to cut yourself and do the warding thing first?"

"Oh, that. His leg was pretty torn up. The more damaged something is, the harder it is to repair. Cloth is easy, but people? They're a bit more of a challenge. I didn't think I could manage the whole leg at once. But the ward doesn't care how damaged something is, it just heals. So I did the one, then was able to manage the other. It took everything I had, though."

"It's no wonder you passed out, then."

"Never been pushed that far before. Guess I never had a reason to."

"We're glad we found you," Don assured him. "We owe you a lot."

"But I owe you a sword," he chuckled. "Tomorrow or the next day I'll see about making you one. It won't be as pretty, maybe, but I think I can make you something similar."

"Don't strain yourself."

"Better I do and get you armed again, rather than rely on just my sword for our next encounter." The others nodded, agreeing. "We should see if you can pick it up and use it, by the way. I can't see it being tied to me in any way, but better do it now than in the middle of a fight and you actually burning yourself. By the way, which way are we going? Did you guys dig out the collapsed tunnel?"

Both shook their heads. "We turned around. We're taking the passage we past about an hour before the worm attack," Don explained.

"If there's one worm in that direction, there's probably another," agreed Everest.

“We thought it best to head away from that area as much as we could. The tunnel is collapsed anyway, and the worm came from that direction. I don’t think anyone will want to head there, so leaving the map incomplete that way is probably fine.”

“I think we’ve more than earned that sack of coin the beastkin girl gave you.”

“Hear, hear!” Don agreed, lifting his cup. “And you’ll get a share, make no mistake.”

The three clinked their rough cups together, (two wooden and one stone, made by Lysanias earlier), glad to be alive and among friends.

Meeting People

When: Several days after the worm incident

Where: Endless Tunnels (But not for much longer, promise)

While Lysanias didn't know much about the construction of swords, Don certainly did. Conversely, Don had no idea how Lysanias could simply touch a material and change both the shape and composition of it. Together the two made him a replacement sword over the course of the next few days. Don providing instruction in how it should look and adjusting the balance, Lysanias moving the material around as he was able.

"It probably wouldn't hold up as well as my forged one," Don complained, giving the finished product a few swings. "A sword isn't just an iron bar with a sharp edge. It's folded and pounded and quenched in a certain way. That gives the metals certain qualities I don't know that your way of doing things can replicate."

"Or," protested Lysanias somewhat smugly, "it'll hold up better because of the amount of rock I used to create the metal." *But he does have a point. Is an iron sword different from an iron fork, for example? Should I try to analyze shield metal and sword metal and raw metal, see if there are differences I can detect and give to what I make?*

"You mean it might still have the properties of rock?" Everest asked, perking up.

Lysanias shook his head. "Remember how I started with that large rock and turned it into metal, so it shrank down a bit?"

"Sure."

"Then I reshaped it into roughly the shape of a sword, and then shrank it down some more?"

"Yeah?"

"That strengthened it. I really was packing the metal more 'tightly' together. I do know *something* about forging, after all. I did watch weapons and armor being made in the traditional way after all."

"Watching isn't the same as doing, lad."

"I know that. But I know the amount of work that goes into it. My hope is, using more metal and packing it more tightly together will somewhat make up for the fact the blade wasn't exactly forged."

"Whatever the case lad, I'm glad to be armed again." He stuck the blade into his sheath. "Don't feel quite right without a blade at my side."

They really do live in a world where that's needed, I guess. Does the Allfather enjoy watching us fighting for our lives or something? Scrabbling around in the dirt trying to make our way? After so long, so many disasters, was this the future He envisioned for us when He made the first man? I suppose I shouldn't hold it against Him, by the sounds of it we would have been wiped out sooner or later even without the flood. But all this they've told me, it hasn't made their lives better, it's only made them worse. Aren't things supposed to get better all the time?

Also during this time Lysanias worked to sense magic in the environment around him, and successfully created water with magic. Not as much as Don could manage at once, but he said that would come in time. The more skilled the magic user, the more of an element he could get at one time. Everest couldn't stop shaking his head that it even worked, but he drank the water just the same. They started drilling on Sun magic, to now start the more difficult spell of creating food.

And the group moved on. The change in the tunnel, now days later, was immediate. It went from a circular path through the rock to something more worn and natural, and also branched in several directions in an intersection in this one spot. The floor was flatter, the upper portion more rough.

Perhaps some of the ceiling was knocked down to smooth out the floor and make it easier for larger groups to get through?

Both more experienced travelers looked the walls over, nodding.

“What’s it mean, are we in more danger?” Lysanias asked them.

“Not dwarven work, I can tell you that much,” Don told him.

“There’s lots of races that live underground though, so it’s impossible to say which race made these tunnels. Most wouldn’t attack on sight, though of course some would be more welcome to see than others.”

“Are we turning around?”

“Good question lad.” Don got out the map and sat down, spreading it out before him. “It’s a long way to go back...” He traced a finger along their most current route. Lysanias looked over his shoulder and followed where he was pointing. They would have to go back several days along the route they just took, past the worm attack site again backtracking, and then to another intersection they had passed.

“I still think it’s pointless for us to be down here,” Everest told Don. “We should head this way, it’s probably the fastest way to the surface.” He pointed right.

“We should head straight, that’s the most likely way to whoever made these tunnels,” Don countered. Lysanias looked all the openings over, seeing nothing really different about any of them. *What makes him so sure? Is there some sign I’m not seeing?*

“Why go there first?”

“Get Lysanias some proper clothes, for one. And maybe get something proper to drink after all this time, and eat too!”

“He could make himself clothes like he made your sword if he really wanted some.”

Both looked over at him. “I suppose I could,” he hedged. “Turn some rock into cloth. Try and make something that would fit. I don’t really know anything about making clothes though. I can’t exactly use you two as a model, and my clothes are too small to get a good idea about something my size... Uh, no offence,” he added, realizing they may be sensitive about their height.

“None taken lad, we are shaped a bit differently. We could get you clothes on the surface though, just as easily. Probably more, it’s more likely to be a human town on the surface than down here.”

“If there’s a town nearby.”

“Of course there’s going to be a town, where else would the tunnel go? They probably use it to trade for stuff they can’t get down here.”

“Or going right leads to the town dump, in which case asking directions at the town would save us time. We could sleep in beds instead of on the ground. Maybe see if they’ve mapped out the tunnels around here, saving us time.”

“Or attack us on sight, given-”

He had been interrupted in this by something small and squat barreling into him from the tunnel that went straight.

“What in the world?” asked Don, as both went sprawling.

“Ow!” said the newcomer, “what hit me?”

“Hobgoblin,” spat Don, reaching over to pick it up by the shirt collar. “What are you doing running around here?”

“Lemme down, lemme down!” the creature squealed, thrashing about in his grip.

“Quiet!” roared Don.

“Don’t hurt me, don’t eat me, don’t wanna be a slave!”

“No one is going to hurt you,” Lysanias said to him. “Calm down and tell us what you’re running from.”

The creature’s eyes opened and he stopped squirming. “You speak orc?”

Wishing to avoid a lengthy explanation, Lysanias simply agreed with him. “Yes.

Who are you? What are you running from?"

"Probably just a thief, like the rest of his kind," Don told him. "You okay there, Everest?"

He was getting up and rubbing his back. "I'm fine. What do we do with this little guy?"

"My sword does need to be broken in..." he threatened.

"No," protested Lysanias. "We aren't just going to kill him."

"Kill me?" squeaked the hobgoblin. "Is that what they're saying? Why kill me? Didn't do anything to them. Don't even have a weapon, lost it. Nothing to do with them, leave me alone!"

"What's he saying?"

"Oh, set him down already, can't you see he's terrified?"

"They're just vermin. Whoever lives down here will be glad to see this one gone."

"What if the town ahead belongs to people like this?"

"People?" Don snorted. "Hardly. Still, I don't want to hold him up all day. Tell him I'm putting him down if he promises not to run away."

"He's going to set you down. Do you promise not to run?"

"I promise! I promise!"

"He says he does. Put him down."

"Very well."

The creature got set down and Lysanias looked it over. It had large eyes and ears, and skin that would not have looked out of place on Everest, being lumpy like rock. Given that as short a guy as a dwarf could hold it in the air it was pretty short, only coming up to Lysanias' waist. It was dressed simply in little more than rags, and carried no weapon just as it said. It wasn't standing up straight, and looked up at them slightly hunched over. It had a funny smell about it too, that Lysanias couldn't place.

"Now, why did you... Aarg, why my run into friend!" Don demanded.

"Huh?"

"You run into why friend?"

"He doesn't speak very well, does he?"

"He's asking why you ran into us."

"Have to get away!"

"Get away from what?" *Is there another worm coming?*

"From what? That!" He suddenly pointed down the tunnel and Lysanias spun and put his hand on his sword.

There was nothing there.

"From wha- huh?" He turned back to look and the creature was already booking it down the left hand tunnel.

Don looked sympathetically at him. "That trick should have been old news even for you," he remarked, looking as if he was trying not to laugh. Lysanias took his hand off his sword, feeling sheepish.

"Why didn't you grab him again?"

He mumbled something, looking down.

"He doesn't want to admit he got taken in too," Everest ribbed him.

"I did not! I just wanted to see what the boy would do, that's all."

"You're not fooling anyone you know."

"Are we going after him... it? Them? Whatever it was?"

"Bah, let him go. Stupid things."

It didn't seem that stupid, and it was smart enough to get away from us. "Seemed to be in an awful hurry."

"Probably got caught stealing something. That's all they do, make trouble for us

that live down here.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“And you understood it perfectly, didn’t you?” Everest asked.

“You didn’t?” Both shook their heads. *Other languages. Makes no sense.*

“What were we saying?” Don asked, returning to the matter at hand.

“Which way should we go.”

“Ah, right. Fine, you want to head to the surface, we can head to the surface.”

“Actually, now I’m more interested in seeing what he was running from.” He looked down the way the hobgoblin had come from.

“Oh now you want to go straight. Changing your mind on a whim. Typical.”

“I would think you would be happy to have me agreeing with you.”

“But it wasn’t me that convinced you. So why should I be happy about it?”

“What difference does that make?”

“If we’re going, let’s go,” Lysanias started plodding towards the main tunnel.

“Did I tell you the story about how I fought off four of those things at once?” Don asked, hurrying behind him. “All I had for a weapon was my bath towel, having just come from there…”

Less than an hour later another figure came into view, something very odd that did not look like the hobgoblin at all. It was essentially a giant mushroom, and as it came into view of the swordlight, both Don and Everest rushed to the side of the thing.

“Hey, are you all right?” Don asked, looking the thing over and giving it a shake.

“That’s a pretty bad wound, you think it’s still alive?”

“Uh, are you two playing a joke on me? Why are you talking to a plant?”

He got closer and yes, it was a mushroom with some chunks carved out of it. It had a simple tubular body, but he did notice it seemed to have arms and legs. Even stumpier ones than his dwarf friend had. *Wait, have even plants started walking around as well as rocks? What’s next, talking trees? Water that can think?* The “cap” on the head was also torn up, and a jagged looking piece of metal lay nearby. It also smelled terrible.

“They’re alive, at least normally,” explained Everest. “I think this one is still breathing, but it’s hard to know for sure. Can you heal it? If it’s not dead that should wake it up I would think.”

“I’ll have to try and analyze what it is first. I don’t think it’s bleeding so it should be fine if it takes a few minutes.” Indeed, the tunnel was dry so even if the creature had dragged itself there, no more “blood” had leaked out from the wounds it seemed to have sustained. He stepped up and reached out, touching the body of the thing. It took him several minutes but he finally announced “I think this thing is poisonous.”

“Maybe if you ate him,” Everest suggested. “Can you heal him?”

“I can try.” Slowly the flesh of the creature knitted itself back together, and Lysanias looked him over to see if there were any other wounds. He didn’t see any, so they let him be until he stirred.

Squinty eyes opened and it shaded them against the light of the torch. “I seem to be alive,” it said, a small slit where the mouth would be opening for it to speak. “Do I have you to thank for that?”

“I suppose,” Lysanias said modestly. “Are you all right? Do you want some water?”

The creature put a hand to its side, looking for the wound. “How long was I laying there for? I don’t even seem to be wounded anymore. And I would love some, thank you.”

“I managed to heal you.” He handed over the water skin, and the creature gratefully drank some down.

“Did you now?” he asked, handing it back. “You have my thanks. I don’t suppose

you saw that hobgoblin that did this?"

"We ran into him, but he escaped us. Seemed to be in an awful hurry too."

"I can well imagine. If I were you I wouldn't go any further in that direction. Help me stand, will you?"

Lysanias hauled him up, and he looked around. The creature was taller than the dwarf, but not quite as tall as Lysanias was. *Am I some kind of giant now?* "A dwarf and a gnomad, traveling underground with a human. How strange."

"It's a long story."

"What's he saying?" asked Everest.

"Oh, apologies, I was speaking Sylvan. I take it they don't know that language?"

"Do you know Sylvan?" he asked them.

"I know Trade pretty well, dwarven, and a little spidren," Don told him.

"I speak Trade natively, of course I picked up dwarven, and even less spidren. Mostly cursing, to be honest." Both smirked at each other.

How many languages are there? "They don't."

"I wouldn't have expected it. Please make my apologies to them. The most spoken language around here is Spidren."

"They know a little of that."

"I will attempt that language, then."

"Tell him not to bother, just see what he's doing here and how far the town is," Don commanded, exasperated.

"We aren't very fluent, it would just confuse us."

Tell him yourselves, I don't want to deal with this strange looking thing. He sighed. "Anyway, what happened to you?"

"Most recently I was attacked by that nasty little hobgoblin. Managed to wrest his weapon away from him, and he ran off. Must have collapsed soon afterwards, as I see it laying there. I escaped from the village some time ago and he probably did later and caught up to me. They're a bit faster than we are, of course."

"What village?"

"You haven't heard? You're coming from the other direction? From the surface?"

He shook his head, wondering if that even meant anything to this plant creature. "We're coming from the worm tunnels in the other direction."

"Really? You've been traveling for some time then. I've heard they've never really been mapped. I should probably start from the beginning then. About a day ago now the farming village I 'work' at was attacked and many of its people were dragged off."

"Attacked? By what?"

"I'm not exactly sure," he admitted. "I've never seen them before. Some kind of magic wielding, feathered, lizard people."

"Magic using, featured lizard people?" Lysanias asked the other two.

"Doesn't ring a bell. You?" asked Don.

"No idea," replied Everest.

"Go on."

"It was a rather large force of them, fifty at least, and they swarmed the place. Naturally I hid, so I didn't see much, but eventually they left. Most of them, anyway. I managed to slip past the guards they left, and saw the village was mostly abandoned. I'm heading to the next nearest one to see if my services can be of use."

"What do you do?"

"Eat garbage, mostly," he admitted. "I eat what most other races would try to get rid of, so it works out for everybody."

"I see. So..." Lysanias tried to think of what Don would want to know about this. "Did you see many dead?"

"I think mostly they were taking prisoners. The elves in the village are farmers, not warriors. They wouldn't have been able to put up much of a struggle. So unless these lizard people wanted them dead for some reason, they wouldn't have been

injured fighting back. They probably just surrendered immediately, having been caught by surprise.”

“So they were imprisoned or carried off?”

“I assume so.”

“And you say they used magic?”

“Oh yes. All of them, that I could see. Never seen so much magic used in one place, it was no wonder they took the village so quickly.”

Great, I thought that magic users were supposed to be rare?

“And you didn’t see where they went? I mean not this way, obviously.”

“I’m sorry, I was hiding by that time. I think one actually saw me, but I was being still at the time and it may have thought I was just a large mushroom. I’m not sure if I should be grateful or not.”

“I suppose that’s up to you. How big is... Was the village?”

“Two dozen houses at most.”

Great, I have no idea if that’s big or small. “Let me tell the others what you’ve told me, see if they have any questions.”

“Of course.”

So he told the other two what had happened, and both looked concerned.

“Not that I have any love for deep elves, you understand, these ‘feathered lizard people’ concern me,” Don admitted.

“Should we go check it out?” Everest asked.

“None of our business, is it?”

“It is if this is happening all over. Parties of magic using people from deeper underground? That won’t set the mages’ guild off. We don’t need another magical war. We should learn all we can about these people and what their intentions are. Then we can warn the surface if that’s where they’re headed.”

“Ugh, that means helping elves.”

“What did these elves ever do to you?” Lysanias asked.

“*These* elves? Nothing. It’s just they came from angelic stock, while we came from demonic.”

“And that makes them less worthy of help?”

“I’m not saying that, I’m saying they won’t be happy to see any of us.”

“They will if we can do something about this invasion of their farm.” *He said farm, right? These are farmers? What are they farming down here? Mushrooms?*

“How do you figure that?” Everest asked.

“Are you saying they wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know, they’re elves, who can explain their behavior?” Don grumped.

“Do they have any questions for me?” the mushroom asked politely.

“Do you need to know anything else? He seems eager to be away from here.”

The two thought a moment.

“How many guards?” Don asked.

“Just one at each exit to the surface, and there seem to be three of those,”

Lysanias translated for the group.

“So probably six left behind. If we take them by surprise... I think that’s it. The rest we can see for ourselves.”

“Provided we go there.”

“That’s all. Thanks.”

“Of course. Thank you again for healing me. That tunnel to the left from here will go to the surface,” said the mushroom, pointing back the way the group had come. “I’m going right, towards the next nearest village. I would just get out of here, if I were you. If you decide to go that way, you’ll probably catch up to me.”

“They’ll argue about it, so I don’t know which way we’ll go in the end,” he answered with a grin.

“I see. We try not to argue amongst ourselves, but that’s just us. Good luck.”

“You too. Thanks for the information.”

He inclined his head towards the others and waddled off back the way the three had come.

Now for the argument about what to do next.

Getting Closer

When: A few minutes later

Where: Closer to the elf village, but still in the tunnels

“So tell me about elves,” Lysanias requested as they walked. The group had now agreed to at least see what was up with the village, and were heading in that direction. Don at least admitted that even if the place was now deserted, they could see what sort of magic had been used and maybe swipe some stuff (clothes especially) before moving on.

“After all,” Don reasoned, “how would they know that we did it, versus these lizard people swiping stuff? It’s the perfect crime.”

“Isn’t stealing wrong?”

“It’s only stealing if you get caught.”

“I’m not sure-”

Don’s laughter drowned out the rest of the sentence.

“Elves, huh?” Don repeated after he calmed down a bit.

“Like what are they? Where did they come from?”

“Originally they were angels, just as originally we were demonic,” explained Everest. “After the heavens interceded against the dragons and showed up to teach humans to govern themselves and such, many decided to stay.”

“They left Heaven?”

“That’s right. Only they know why, maybe they were just bored of perfection? Anyway, they lost their wings and become the pompous jerks we know and love today.”

Lysanias digested this. “Why live underground? There must be more to it than that. Did something drive them down here?”

“What’s wrong with living underground?” Don demanded. “But okay, some elves thought they hadn’t gone far enough, I guess? Wanted to be even further from Heaven maybe? So they came to live in places like this. We call these deep elves, or-”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Everest asked. “This is why you should leave explaining to me.”

“What?”

“It was more like elves, then dark elves, *then* deep elves. I was getting to that, before I was interrupted.”

“Oh, sorry, professor. Fine, elves turned further from the heavens and became ‘dark’ elves. Then some of those wanted to go even further and they live here. Is that better?”

“He did ask, we should give him the most accurate information possible.”

“So are there still elves?”

“Sure. All kinds of elves. They’ve had kids, and they live a long time, so why wouldn’t there be?”

“I just thought maybe there were no ‘pure’ elves left. So all these different types came from those original angels? That didn’t go back to Heaven when their time was done?”

“That’s right.”

He paused. *I suppose it’s a good thing they did change. Angels having kids with humans resulted in nephilim. And nobody wants to see that happen again. Maybe the Allfather did something to them when they decided to not return? But as a punishment or to keep the rest of us safe? With Him I suspect the former.* “So why aren’t there different kinds of dwarves?”

“How many different kinds do you need?” Don asked sourly. “You’ve already got the best.” He stroked his beard.

Though I suppose gnomads are a different type of dwarf.

"I said you've already got the best!" Don said a bit louder.
"I agree!"
"That's better."

The group soon came in sight of the tunnel exit into the open area that probably served as the "farm." Somewhat reluctantly Lysanias left the sword behind and the group crept forward in darkness to see who was standing guard. It was one of the lizard people as far as Lysanias could see, though they could not risk a very close approach. Those that could see in the dark (Don) could make out a short white top, (she was obviously female) blue shorts that left her legs mostly bare, and some sort of headgear over her feathers that sprouted from an otherwise bald head. Her face was lit by the device she was holding, and Lysanias would have sworn she was listening to music of some kind. She was swaying back and forth, her shoulders moving rhythmically as she as leaning against the wall of the cave. She had one leg bent and it was tapping out a beat, and every so often she would open her mouth or tap furiously on the glowing device in her hand. Her skin was green and had a pattern to it that no one could make out, and she looked slim and alert for all her ignoring of her assigned job. Guarding the passageway, in case that wasn't clear.

They didn't risk staying long despite her distraction, though Lysanias felt he could watch her swaying like that a few more minutes. Or hours. Don pulled him back and they went down the passageway until the exit was just a speck of light in the distance.

"Not exactly a hardened warrior," Don remarked.

"Looked female," Everest agreed.

"Yeah!" Lysanias enthusiastically agreed.

"Now, don't let the thousands of years you've been asleep cloud your judgment," cautioned Don. "She could be shape-shifted to look like that so as to appear more harmless. And they're magical according to our fungus friend, it only takes one spell to blow us up. We have no idea how prepared she is to do that, or that we even approached unseen. She may have been watching our every move for all we know."

"So we could go back there and find a dozen soldiers waiting for us?"

"It's a possibility, lad."

"So what do we do?"

"Don't go running off," Everest cautioned Don. "Let's make a plan for once."

"I wasn't going to!"

"I saw that look. You were just going to charge her, weren't you?"

His eyes shifted away. "That's one option."

"What's the other?"

"That shroomling got through somehow. That suggests there's a rotation. If we can stay out of sight and wait for the guard to change, we might be able to get through then."

"She didn't look like she was taking her watch duty all that seriously," agreed Everest.

"Which could be a trap," suggested Lysanias.

"Right lad. Unless you've got some other ability you haven't told us about?

Stopping time maybe? Making us invisible?"

"No, nothing like that! How would you even do either of those things?" *Though I suppose a ward could make you ignored, which would effectively make you invisible.*

"Too bad."

I suppose I could try changing us all into mice or something, but even then she could be told to not let anything through, even mice, and just destroy them with spells. We don't know how bloodthirsty she is. Or maybe she eats mice and would scoop us up and pop us into her mouth. That would be awkward.

"Maybe I could get her in the head with a rock," suggested Everest. "I do have the light to aim at, as she's helpfully illuminated her head for us."

“What if that rock had some blood on it?” expanded Don.

“Why would it have blood on it?”

Don looked over at Lysanias.

“I don’t know, even if that worked it wouldn’t hold her for long. Blood wards are very, very temporary.”

“But it could work?” Don pressed.

“If you could get her in the head, that might hurt her enough to distract her and let the ward capture her. Putting something alive in,” he shook his head. “I’ve never tried it.”

“But if it didn’t knock her out, at least we would get another chance to neutralize her happening at the same time she gets hit. It’s a two for one special.”

“We haven’t had the two for one special in ages,” Everest remarked looking wistful. Lysanias looked confused. “It’s a thing at this bar we go to... Never mind. I suppose each has an element of risk,” he went on. “We wait, the chances we’re discovered here goes up. She might be relieved instead of leaving her post, meaning we waited for nothing and might get someone more alert. But knocking her in the head and we don’t pull it off? The whole place will know and we’re captured for sure.”

“You’re overthinking it. I’m confident in both of your skills. Come on, find a rock and let’s do this!”

Everest and Lysanias looked at each other but neither had any better ideas. They found a rock that was flat enough to hold the blood, and Lysanias again wounded himself and painted the design on with a finger. *I really have to get some ink. And a brush. And paper would be nice...*

That done it was active and as the rock was currently being held up by Everest’s power, the next thing it touched would be pulled into the ward. They crept closer again, trying to shield the light of the sword by having Lysanias in back, and Everest let the rock fly.

“OW!” she exclaimed as the rock conked her right behind the strange headgear she was wearing.

And then she was gone.

“What do you know, that actually worked,” Everest said, astonished.

“I’m as surprised as you,” admitted Lysanias. “Let’s go grab it before someone sees.”

The trio made their way out of the tunnel and into the “village” with Lysanias grabbing the rock carefully to not disturb the blood. The group swiftly hid behind the only thing in sight, which was a pen holding giant spiders. Lysanias tucked the rock into the pouch made from a rag and tied with some string onto the strap that held his sword’s sheath. It would bounce but probably stay there.

“This is not very much cover,” observed Everest. “and that sword fire is going to stick out. We need to find someplace we can actually hide.”

“How about that house? The door looks caved in.” Don pointed nearby and Lysanias looked at it. He could see only darkness beyond the light of his torch, so he took Don’s word for it. Don saw that all the houses here had been invaded, their doors being blown apart to allow entry. The houses themselves were all stone, seemingly carved out of natural formations that rose up or down through this cave. Dotted all over were cages full of spiders, the larger ones more like pens holding large spiders while smaller spiders each got their own “room.”

Probably to keep them from eating each other.

Lysanias concentrated, trying to feel life in the direction Don had pointed. “I don’t sense anything, but I can’t see how far away the house is, either.”

“Good enough for me, lad.” He glanced around. “Let’s go.”

The group sped towards the house after Don and yanked the remains of the door open. Crowding inside they closed it and pressed up against the wall of the house

listening for any shouts from outside that would show they had been discovered.

They didn't need to worry about that. What they needed to worry about was the lizard man sitting at a rough table with a bit of food on a fork like device halfway lifted to his mouth. He looked over, frozen.

"I thought you said you didn't feel anything from in here!"

"I also said it was pretty far away!"

"Filthy surface dwellers!" the figure snarled, tossing the fork down.

"No idea what you're saying," said Everest, seizing the initiative and a nearby dish that looked to be made of stone. He flung it at the guy from behind, going for the head. The plate shattered against his skull, and he jerked forward, surprised. Both swordsmen drew their swords, and the lizard man's eyes narrowed. He grabbed up something sitting on the table and pressed a button on it.

"Some kind of weapon!" cautioned Don, moving to the side to try and get around the man.

Lysanias started towards the other side of him.

Everest drew his daggers, seeing no other stone objects in the room that weren't nailed down.

"Intruders in the city!" the man shouted into the device as he dodged Lysanias' rather inept swing. He dodged it easily.

"He's calling for help," Lysanias called to the others. "It's not a weapon."

But Don was in mid swing, and slashed at the man's right hand, trying to "disarm" him. The hand didn't quite come clean off, but it was close. The device went sailing out of his hand though and smashed into the wall nearby.

At least he didn't get a chance to say where in the city. But as soon as they realize the guard is gone, they'll check the nearest houses to that spot. So much for doing this quietly. Can they track those somehow?

He stepped away from the man, intending to smash it just in case. Don and Everest moved as one, but the man simply held his left hand up and shouted "*Vector Redirection!*" The man clearly underestimated the strength of his two opponents who did not get flung back but instead stuck the man in both legs. He wasn't doing so hot now, with his head wound, nearly useless hand and deep gashes in his legs.

Deciding that perhaps he couldn't take these three alone he raised a hand again. "*Molecular Destabilization,*" he intoned, getting this one off by putting some decent effort into it. Both lunged for him again but he just smiled as their blades harmlessly passed through his body. He gave a strange hand gesture, perhaps something rude, perhaps some kind of salute to worthy foes (we'll never know) and simply passed through the wall and out into the street.

"They'll be here in seconds," Don suggested. "Any suggestions? They might just blow this whole house up with us in it."

"I doubt it," replied Everest. "They would want to find out what happened to that girl, and how we got here. Capture, I'm sure, is in our future."

Lysanias finished smashing up the device and looked around. The room they were in was dominated by a central, stone pillar that served as the focal point of the room. It seemed these elves weren't big on privacy, or this one lived alone. It was a strange geometric shape, quite pretty really, large at the base and twisting upwards towards the ceiling. The "rooms" of the house were simply different sections, all radiating outward from this one point. *Probably was either hollowed out or started this way, and was turned into a house just like all the rest of them. I'll give these "elves" this much credit, they do seem to live in harmony with nature.* He put his sword back and stalked over to it.

"You have an idea, lad?"

"If I can make it work. Let me concentrate." He put his hands on the stone and willed it to open, flowing large enough to make an opening that two smaller people and one human could at least uncomfortably stand inside for a time. But it was simply too

massive, and he wasn't practiced enough to figure out how to move that much stone. "Sorry," he said, giving up. "It's not going to work."

"I see what you were going for, good idea just the same. Now we need another. Is there a back door to this place?"

"Nope."

"Ah."

"Wait, maybe we can make one!" said Everest. "Your ability, it's based on weight right?"

Not knowing it was actually based on mass, Lysanias nodded. He thought of the two things as the same, being from a very primitive culture all told.

"Then just separate a thin layer of stone in a square here." He ran over to the back wall and the others followed. "We'll slip out the back and repair the hole, they won't know how we got out!"

Lysanias didn't waste time debating it, simply doing as instructed. This he managed, simply running a finger along the wall in a square shape and "unzipping" it, hardly affecting any weight at all. Everest pulled it out with his ability to manipulate stone, and the three slipped out into the back yard of the place. Everest put the stone back and Lysanias hastily repaired the crack. "I can't do much more," he complained. "All this working with stone takes a lot out of me."

"If someone had properly figured out there was an enemy in that house we wouldn't be in this situation."

"If someone had given me a chance once we got closer instead of just busting in there-

"Not now," chided Everest. "Find a place to hide."

"Like where?" Don demanded. "It's a big open cave with a bunch of spider pens."

"You're the one with the magic, you figure it out."

"If you wanted a new tunnel-" He broke off and the others looked at him. "Could you manage moving a small amount of rock lad?"

"If I had to."

"Then I do have an idea after all." He cast at their feet, and a hole opened in the stone nearby. "Inside, quick!"

Oh, he adapted my idea to what he could do. Teamwork!

Everest shimmied down the hole, then Don. Lysanias followed last and found himself in a rather tight space magically carved out of the rock. *But if I close this up, won't we suffocate? I can't purify the air very long. Wait, maybe they won't look carefully at every pebble.* He touched the lip of the hole and willed a very thin ribbon of rock to go up and over the hole in effect making a small, hollow "bolder" that was only touching the ground in that one spot. So there was a crack along the other three sides where fresh air could circulate. He had to try it twice but he managed it. "Got it," he said, going further down the hole and looking further back. Don and Everest were jammed up together in the narrow space which seemed just wide enough for two people.

"Been a while since we were this close, eh?" Don was wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Why didn't you make this larger?" But he didn't sound displeased.

"Couldn't risk it collapsing if a bunch of people started walking around above us."

"Oh is that what you're telling yourself?"

"Quiet!" hissed Lysanias, as he felt energy signatures coming closer.

One might think that these guys, who could learn to sense energy in the same way Lysanias did, would find them straight off. And usually you would be right. However, all three had been running about and doing stuff, and that had used up most of their energy. This meant it would have been very difficult to find them had they just been standing there, and these guys were none too practiced at the technique. They were more relying on sight because they didn't consider someone basically entombing

themselves to avoid detection. Nor did any of them spot the minor crack in the stone that Lysanias had left, and hastily moved on.

"We'll wait here for an hour or so," Don whispered. "Let them think we're gone and then try again."

"That sounds fine."

A minute passed. Then two. Lysanias was thinking furiously. Something wasn't right, something important. *Aren't we forgetting something? Some loose end that-*

Suddenly there was a bang, a tearing of cloth, and Lysanias found himself pressed up against something quite soft. He could hear music coming from the strange thing now near his head, and he was looking into a pair of beautiful golden eyes that sparkled in the torchlight. His legs were intertwined with another pair, and they felt warm and smooth. The girl's skin patterns could clearly be seen now, though in this light they were not as colorful or pronounced as they would be otherwise. Lysanias felt heat rising in his cheeks.

"Oh, I'm out," said a melodious voice. "That was really bizarre. Hey, where am I?" She wiggled against him, but couldn't really go anywhere.

That was it. "Quiet, we're hiding!" Lysanias managed, not really knowing how to respond to this.

"Hiding?" she asked quietly, her eyes darting about. "From who?"

"From the people trying to find us, of course."

Her mouth opened and closed a few times like a fish. "Can you be more specific?"

"What's she doing here?" Don demanded. "Did you let her out?"

"I told you it only lasted a few minutes! This isn't my fault."

Her eyes narrowed, trying to see who had spoken near her feet. "Not really into the whole group scene, if that's what you think is going to happen. You better start explaining yourself. *Fast.*"

Are Girls the Same Everywhere?

When: Just a second later

Where: Squeezed tightly in the hidey hole

Lysanias was in a tight spot. The girl they had found guarding the passageway into and out of the city had successfully been put into the contain ward rock he had hastily made, and that had gotten them into the mess they were currently in. But now they were hiding in a shallow trench underground and the blood had dried or gotten messed up enough to let her out. She was now (not unpleasantly) squashed against him, and rapidly looking more angry. She wasn't trying to kill them magically, which was a plus, but more probably because of the proximity than any desire to not cause them harm. He felt that if he didn't start telling some story, and a good one, that might change. The problem was he wasn't really used to dealing with girls or making up stories, and she had just asked him a very bizarre question.

"Group? What?" sputtered Lysanias. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't. Come on, what is this? Some kind of necrophilia cult? I don't want any part of it. Let me out immediately." She started wiggling again.

"A what? Please stop that!" Don and Everest were now both struggling not to bust out laughing. "You two aren't helping!"

"Oh, you're on your own in this one, lad."

"What's she saying, anyway?"

"I'm not acting as a translator *now!*"

"Wait, why do you speak our language?" the girl asked, suddenly still again. "And you speak it perfectly. I don't even detect an accent."

"It's a long story. Can we just call a truce or whatever for a few minutes? We won't hurt you or... do anything to you. This situation is uncomfortable enough as it is, and I'm sorry for dragging you into it," though part of him was lying, "but for now we have to make the best of it."

She seemed to consider. "I guess it's more exciting than standing guard over a stupid hole. And you seem reasonable, for a lower life form. Okay, truce, but I want some answers."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. My name is Lysanias, what's yours?"

"I'm Yttrius, named after the metal Yttrium, atomic number 39."

"Oh really?" *What in the world...* "Is that a common name among your people?"

"You speak our language but you don't know *that?*" She giggled.

"Let's say I've been out of touch with the world for quite some time."

"Okay. So why are you in this dragon forsaken place?"

"You mean the town or this hole?"

She seemed to consider. "Town first, then hole."

"Sounds reasonable. We were mapping the worm tunnels looking for gold and such, and ran into a... What do you call that creature?"

"Hobgoblin," answered Everest.

"Thank you. Hobgoblin running away from the city. We heard about your... Invasion?"

"That's a good word for it. Stupid thing to do, but I got dragged along."

"You were?"

"Ah, ah, ah," she said playfully. "It's your story time now."

"That's fair. Anyway, we heard about the invasion from a talking mushroom we found further towards the city and healed him up. We decided to come check it out."

"And brained me in the head with a rock? It still hurts you know. Why did I deserve that?"

"Sorry about that. We didn't know how hostile you would be."

"I wouldn't have been. Anyone else probably would have. I would have been glad

to have someone to talk to. You know how boring it was, just standing there? What happened to me anyway? I was someplace really weird and I couldn't get any reception on my padform."

"Padform?"

"Oh, you don't have that kind of technology, do you? In fact from what I saw of this place you don't really have any. I'm talking about this." She wiggled her hands free and showed Lysanias her glowing device. It was basically a modern cell phone, with a colorful screen and currently an equalizer showing the waveform of the music that was still playing in her headset. (She had lowered the volume when they started talking)

Lysanias didn't understand what he was looking at, but he did realize it was pretty impressive. "That's really great!" He stared at the patterns on the screen, enchanted by the display of color and movement. *How is this such a thing even possible? Magic?*

"Eh, it's almost obsolete now, the newer ones are way better. This is a junker I bought with some money I made as my dad won't get me a better one. So where was I?"

"I'm not sure I can explain it to you. I can create a space that can hold things, and anchor it to a specific object. In this case the rock."

"Oh, some kind of folded or compressed space? Or is it an offset dimension?"

I now understand the difference between understanding a language and actually understanding what someone is saying. "I can show you later, if you want. That's probably easier than trying to explain it."

"Okay, I'd love to see it!" She grinned, and Lysanias found himself grinning back.

How did this girl come to be part of an invasion force? Something doesn't add up here. Or is she just acting this way to get more information out of me? She seems almost my age, I mean before I grew up while asleep.

"So go on."

He gave a little jerk and came back to himself. "Right, so after we put you away so to speak we tried to hide in a house. Didn't work out, the alarm was raised."

"You didn't kill anyone, did you?"

"No, no, no," he hastened to assure her. *Not that we didn't try. Is violence all I have to look forward to here? It seems like it's just been tunnels and blood since I woke up.* "He got away, he'll be fine."

"That's good. So you had to hide?"

"That's right. This was about the only thing we could come up with on such short notice."

"It is rather bleak around here, isn't it? Then I popped out again and here we are."

"That's right."

"I see. Well, it was probably best you hid. They wouldn't like other people hanging around. They would have put you with the others."

"Others?"

"Yeah, the men of this village. The woman and some men were taken back to our territory. We couldn't guard them all with the force we had, but we didn't want them running around either."

"So there are some people left."

"Sure, I mean we're not monsters. We wouldn't just murder them in cold blood!"

"But what are you doing here?"

"Me? Tagging along after my father, actually. I didn't want to come but he didn't want to leave me alone while mom was on that business trip. Like I couldn't take care of myself. I'm not a child."

Lysanias could feel the evidence of this and just nodded.

"So here I am. Those not quite as committed to the vision of our 'glorious leader' got stuck here making sure no one followed the main party to the surface."

"So is your father here too?"

"No." She looked concerned. "He suddenly decided leaving me behind was fine."

Honestly I was thinking about going back home. But leaving my dad..."

"I know. I recently found out my family was dead, had been for some time."

Massive understatement, but it's true. "So I know how important family is."

"That's terrible, I'm sorry to hear that!"

"Thanks."

There was a moment of silence. She shifted around trying to get comfortable. This really only served to make Lysanias more uncomfortable.

"So now what?"

"I'm not sure. Hide here until they stop looking for us. Then figure out our next move."

"If you just want to leave, I'm sure I can sneak you back down the tunnel I was guarding. You can go to the surface from there."

"Would you? You wouldn't turn us in or anything?"

"Why would I do that? You're not my problem. And there's only three of you, what are you going to do? Stay out of our way and you'll be fine."

He had to admit this was a legitimate way of thinking. But he had another thought. "Is someone going to be looking for you?"

"Oh, maybe. I suppose I better get back. I can tell them the truth, that I got put into a weird space and only now popped out. I don't have to tell them I saw you."

"I guess I'm going to have to trust you, but can you get out of here? Turn yourself into a ghost or something?"

"You mean destabilize my molecules to pass through normal matter with magic? I do know that spell, yes." She looked around. "Tricky, trying to climb out of this hole that way. But I can teleport, so I'll just do that."

So she could have left at any time. Great. Did I just tell her everything and now she's just going to lead a bunch of people back here? I guess she would have done that in either case... "I guess you better go, then."

"Yeah." She hesitated. "You're not exactly what I expected, surface dweller."

"We call ourselves human."

"Human? We're annunaki. I've never actually talked to someone not my own race. It was kind of nice. We're taught in school you're little better than animals, but you seem perfectly sentient to me. I'll see you later, okay?"

"I'd like that!"

She smiled and made some quick gestures with her hands. There was an implosion of air and she was gone.

"Somebody's got a girlfriend, somebody's got a girlfriend!" Don singsonged.

"I do not!" Lysanias protested, blushing again.

"No? You were talking for quite a while. And apparently she could leave at any time. What would you call it?"

"Pumping me for information?" he hedged.

"We heard. Hopefully you got at least something out of that?"

"A little. She says she's willing to help us escape, if we want. She's not actually here by choice, she was dragged along by her father. Apparently their 'leader' is looking for absolute loyalty in his troops, and anyone that didn't meet that criteria got left here."

"That might work in our favor. They may be more lax on security," Everest suggested.

"What does this leader want?"

"She didn't say. She did say there were still elves here, under guard, and that the rest had been sent back to their city for some reason."

"I'm not helping break out elves," Don insisted.

"We can't just leave them locked up though!"

"What do you suggest? Go kill all the guards? I'm sure your new friend would be thrilled about that."

"I don't know."

"This is all moot if she comes back with a force to capture us when we come out of this hole," Everest reminded them.

"I guess we'll just have to see."

Time passed. Lysanias didn't feel any energy signatures above them so it seemed Yttrius had kept her word. He actually fell asleep, and found himself being shaken awake by Don.

"Something got dropped down the hole," Don whispered.

"Huh?" He looked around and found one of the "padform" that Yttrius had showed him, and he picked it up. There was an image on it, of her outside their hiding spot. At least her face, and he could see a little of the rock face behind her.

"Hi!" she said with a smile. Her image actually changed, and sound came out of the device.

He dropped it in surprise, and fumbled it back up. She was giggling. "Sorry. It surprised me."

"I figured that. Come on, let's get you out of that hole and hiding somewhere a little more comfortable. I found a perfect little nook for you all."

"Just a second!" He looked at the others. "She says it's safe, do we trust her?"

"You're the one that's talked to her, lad."

"But she's totally foreign to me. She could lie to my face and I wouldn't know her mannerisms."

"Can't stay here forever either," Everest reminded them.

A silent understanding passed between the three and he brought the device back up. "We're coming out now."

She looked around. "Okay."

He touched the fake rock and willed it away, having to try it three times to get it all moved out of the way. He wiggled out of the hole, helped by Yttrius.

"That wasn't magic, how did you do that?" she asked. "And what are you wearing?" She seemed shocked, or perhaps disgusted. "If that's what passes for fashion on the surface maybe we do need to invade," she continued half to herself.

"It's been a long time..." he managed, feeling exposed and embarrassed.

"We need to get you some clothes. Help me, he looks heavier than you."

"Huh?" he said with great wit, and then helped her get Everest and Don out of the hole.

"Are you three all different species?" she asked, looking them over as they worked feeling back into their limbs.

"That's right."

"And you all work together? What an odd thing. Anyway, come on." She confidently strode off, but the others were more wary. She did stop before finally going around the final house and made sure the way was clear. It was, and she brought them inside. This house was similar to the last, but with thinner and more numerous pillars and a lower ceiling. "There's a small storage area above," Yttrius told them. "I figured that would be more comfortable than the hole."

"Thanks a lot. It's a big help."

They used the stone ladder that was there and then pulled it up.

"Did you make any plans?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Didn't seem to have any point, if you just had us captured when we came out."

"Didn't trust me, huh? I suppose I wouldn't trust you. I heard about that guy you surprised, he was pretty wounded."

"To be fair, he did attack us."

"To be fair, he called for backup, he didn't directly attack you at all."

"I-" But this was true. "We couldn't just let him call for help."

"That much is true," she admitted. "And you wouldn't know to just disable the padform. Oh, can I get my padform back?"

"What? Oh, sure." He handed it back and she stowed it in a pocket in her shorts. She looked him up and down. "You could really use some new clothes. Turn around."

"What?" He was suddenly wary.

"Oh, just do it," she said, spinning him around. "Put your hands up." She grabbed his arm and lifted it, and he felt her measuring his arm with her device. (Just roughly seeing how many lengths it was) She then repeated this with his legs. "Wait here, I'll be back." She lithely dropped through the hole in the floor and down to the lower level.

"What was all that about?" Don asked.

"I honestly don't know."

The trio looked around their new hiding place, and it was used for storage. Not that these elves had much to store, so it was mostly empty boxes used for hauling their wares to the surface for sale to the nearby town. Not long after Yttrius returned and they hauled up some cloth and her. "Here, hopefully these should fit you." She presented him with a complete outfit, and even something that looked like an armored chest piece.

"Oh. Wow, you didn't have to do that!"

"I couldn't have you running around in that, now could I?"

"You're wearing less than I am at the moment," he blurted without thinking.

"What, this?" She spun around, showing herself off. "This is just to annoy my dad. He insists I dress 'as befitting a member of the proud annunaki race.' Like the way I dress has anything to do with it. So I designed this because it was basically the opposite of what most people wear. My friends all love it." She giggled. "I actually made some money making them copies, and my outfits have even been in the local news. That was how I got the padform, now that I think about it."

Wow, she sounds just like Esther. Wasn't she starting to get annoyed with what her father wanted her to do?

"You're pretty famous, huh?"

"No, not me." But she seemed pleased.

"Anyway, this is great, thanks." He started pulling his shirt off but realized he might need to cut it off. It was pretty ragged to begin with, but too tight to really work over his head. She squeaked cutely and turned away. The other two men helped him get out of his rags and put on the new clothes, buckling on the armor pieces too. He looked down at himself.

"All done?" Yttrius asked.

"Yes, you can look now," he replied with a grin.

"Oh yeah, that's much better," she said, walking around him. He was now dressed in a white shirt and pants in an elven style, which fit fairly well given the inexact measurements that had been done. (He had cheated a little and modified it to fit better as he put it on) Strapped to his arms and legs were separate pieces of armor, and a chest plate rounded the outfit out. He could also now properly belt the sword on, and it actually stayed up because a belt had been included too.

"What's this stuff made of?" he asked, pinching a sleeve between his finger and thumb. He hadn't done the lengthy process of analyzing it while dressing.

"Some kind of harvested material from those animals outside I think," Yttrius replied. "There was some armor in various stages of creation where I got that one from. Some kind of weaving and lacquering process I guess? They had heaps of the stuff nearby, and given all those creatures we saw penned up outside..."

"They're called spiders. This is all spider web?"

"Spiders? I don't like them. But that's what it looked like. I guess that makes the people here spider... farmers?"

"Could be. Thanks again."

“Sure thing. I’ll be back later to check on you guys. If you decide to leave I’ll smuggle you out.”

“What if they don’t?”

She considered. “I won’t help you hurt my people. But I won’t get in your way either. You’ll be on your own.”

He nodded. “You’ve already done way more than I would have dreamed of. Thank you.”

“Sure thing. The more I thought about it, the less I felt we should be doing this. A force this small? It doesn’t make sense. Oh sure, there’s always been talk of ‘retaking the surface’ and everything but nothing ever comes of it. Why now? And why so few of us? I don’t think this is being done with any sort of official blessing, even for a scouting mission. People get sent up to scout, see how you surface dwellers are doing, but that’s one or two at a time. This whole thing doesn’t make sense.” She looked away in thought.

“I see. And the people with the real answers to what they’re doing here have all left.”

“That’s right. I don’t think we’ll abandon this area, if that’s what you’re hoping.”

“It would solve our problem. I guess we’ll talk and see what we want to do.”

“Let me know, don’t leave without saying goodbye, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“See you.”

With her once again gone Lysanias turned to the others. “Now we have to figure out what our next move is going to be.”

Helping thy Neighbor

When: The next day sometime

Where: Storage area

The day before, after reaching their new hiding spot with the help of Yttrius, the group had talked about their next move. Don wouldn't be moved about helping elves, but was outvoted by the other two.

"After all," Lysanias had scolded him, "if they had come up in a dwarven city and some elves were passing by, would you refuse their help? Or not thank them for it later?"

"They wouldn't help us!"

"You've decided what every member of an entire race is going to do? That's amazing!" Lysanias said sarcastically.

"Yeah Don, see it as a positive step for race relations between your two peoples."

He grumbled about it, but agreed to do his part to help. Oh, he grumbled. At every opportunity.

The main question was, what help to give. They talked about various ideas and got some sleep, posting the same guard rotation as they had in the caves.

The next morning Yttrius arrived with a basket of food and water, which Lysanias was grateful for given Don didn't want to risk making any and attracting attention. "After all," he said, "someone could be seeking out magic from the street below. Or they have magic detectors, who knows?" She totally ignored Don and Everest, and bounced over to Lysanias who she handed the basket over to. She was dressed in the same clothes, it wasn't really a vacation so she probably only had the one outfit, but Lysanias thought she still looked great.

"Good morning!" she chirped. "Did you have a good night?"

"Pretty good, considering," he agreed. "Food? Thanks a lot!"

"Of course. Couldn't let you starve now could I?" she laughed. "Everyone's given up looking by the way, so we can probably get you out of here pretty easily if you wanted."

Lysanias handed out the food and took some himself, sitting on a box. Yttrius pulled one up across from him and sat down herself.

"We need to talk to you about that," he began. "I hope we can get your help with something."

"Like I said yesterday, I can't do too much for you." She folded her arms across her chest. "Even talking to you like this would probably brand me a traitor."

"What if we were gone first before you had to help?"

"Oh." She considered, drumming the fingers on her right hand on her arm. "Maybe?"

"We want to get the elves out of here, and go after the ones that were taken prisoner. You will have no one to guard because everyone who lived here will be gone."

"That implies you're not going to do a direct assault. You think you can get them out quietly? This should be good."

"Where you come in is to convince your people here that with no one to guard, you should send the bulk of your forces on to the surface. Then we'll come back, hopefully having rescued everybody. With fewer to overpower here hopefully we can maybe chase them off? Then the elves can have their city back and plan their next move. Our duty will be done and we'll move on."

"Where will you go after that?"

"The surface. We aren't sure exactly what's nearby so we'll scout out any towns and warn them of the invasion force that's come up."

She thought a moment more. She scratched between her teeth with a claw, and

Lysanias was surprised to see both her teeth and her nail were sharp and pointed. "That plan seems to have been made to minimize loss of life on both sides," she admitted at last. "If you can pull it off."

"It depends on a lot of things. Where the elves are, how they're guarded. How often they're checked on. Lots of things."

"I suppose I could distract the guards, there's only two of them. But how are you going to actually get them out?"

"Don's spell to tunnel through rock. If we head down from here and across to where they are, we can come up, help them escape, and head to the tunnel your people took to return home."

"That could work," she exclaimed, uncrossing her arms and crossing her legs. She put her elbow on her leg and rested her head on her hand. "You would steal them right out from under the guards, literally!"

"That seems to be our best plan."

"You can see the house from here," she announced, jumping off the box. "If you could look through this wall I could show you."

"I think I can manage that much, but I'd rather save my energy. Hey Don."

"Oh, I am being included. I did wonder."

"It's just easier this way. I'm only telling her what we already talked about last night."

"Sure, it's totally not that she's an exotic looking, friendly seeming, cute female that only you can talk to."

I guess he has a point. I did sort of forget the others existed when she came in the room. Wait, could he be- "Are you jealous?"

"What? No! It's not that at all. For one thing-

"Yes?"

"Never mind. What do you need?"

"Would your spell to open a passageway make just a tiny window in this wall so we could see out?"

"I suppose. As long as it's stone the shape doesn't matter." He cast and opened two small windows, at his height and for the taller people.

"There, you see that house with the two people standing in front of it?"

"No, it's too dark." *How can she see it?*

"Oh? I guess you can't see in the dark?"

"See in the dark?"

"So what am I looking at?" interrupted Don.

Okay, this language thing is really going to get old fast. "She says there's a house with two guards out front. That's where we need to be."

"I see it. Could you ask her to stroll over there, see how many paces away it is?"

Wait, you can see it too? Are my eyes just bad?

"As long as we head in that direction I can tell where they are from the energy they give off."

"So you can. Shouldn't take more than a few castings then."

"Can he do it?"

"He says he can."

"Anything else you need to know?"

"Anything else?"

"Yes, which way are we going after that?"

He asked her.

"Oh, that exit there is how we came up. You'll see the newly created staircases leading down."

"She says-

"I see her pointing. So that way, eh? Fine."

She stepped away from the window. "Finish eating and I'll put the basket away."

Then stroll over there and talk to them for a bit. I can be distracting, when I want to be.” She grinned.

“Thanks.”

“Thank you for not just running down there and slaughtering them. I don’t really know them, but I still don’t want to see them dead.”

Ah. She thinks we could actually do that. Probably because of the flaming sword I’m carrying around but hardly know how to use. We seem more competent than we actually are. I mean I suppose the other two could, but really they’re a miner and a business owner. They know their weapons enough to defend themselves, but have they really ever killed anyone?

So the group finished eating and went down the ladder again.

“I want something from you, in exchange for my help distracting the guards,” Yttrius demanded, planting herself in front of the door with her hands on her hips.

“Oh? What? I can’t really offer you anything...” *I don’t own anything. Even these clothes you got for me. And you don’t know I can make gold, so what could she...*

“I just want your word that you’ll be back and you’ll take me with you when you head to the surface. I want to catch up to my father and see what this is really all about. Something about our ‘great leader’ bothers me, the way he’s gone about this whole thing. I want answers. I’ll wait here for you, but I’m not waiting forever!”

“As long as my friends agree.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine with it.”

“Just a second. You don’t mind if she comes with us to the surface, do you?” he asked the others. He tried not to sound too eager.

“Are you asking for you, or is she asking for her?”

“She’s asking for her. She wants to find her father, and figure out why this is being done.”

“If that’s even true,” remarked Everest.

“Why would she lie? There were plenty of opportunities to ambush us in the night. She’s not against us.”

“Not willing to directly help, either. She’s playing both sides, lad. But sure, why not? We can keep an eye on her.” *Use her as a hostage*, he didn’t say.

“Great! They say yes.”

“Wonderful. Good luck!” She spun and walked confidently out the door.

The plan was put into action. Don did the first casting of the spell, making a tunnel to get under the houses. The group jumped down into it and waited for him to do the second casting.

“Nice girl,” remarked Everest as Don envisioned magical symbols. “I thought her tail was particularly fine.”

“Yes, she had a very nice- wait tail? What tail?”

“You didn’t notice her tail?”

“She didn’t have a tail!”

“I think he was just looking at certain parts of her, Don, and he totally missed that she had a tail.”

“I think so too,” Don replied, trying not to laugh. His second casting was done and he was about to begin the next. He had the group move forward and let the first casting go so the rock reappeared. “That third eye though, that kind of freaked me out.”

“What third eye?”

“Lad, you missed her tail and her third eye? What *were* you looking at that whole time?”

“Nothing! Stop it you guys, she didn’t have any of those things.”

“What about her second head? I mean you saw that at least?”

“I thought the right one was prettier than the left one, what do you think?” asked

Everest.

“Oh no, left one for me. Looked more bearded.”

“Now I’m just going to ignore you,” Lysanias told them in a huff.

Both men had to take a moment to compose themselves.

The tunnel Don could make was fairly long, and only a forth casting was needed before Lysanias felt the spiritual energy of the elves above. He cast again, carving out a large circular space so everyone had room to move around, and Lysanias cut a hole in the stone above to make a hole.

When Don casts the spell the stone vanishes but then comes back. Where is it going? I could do the same thing if I had more practice, but I would need it to go someplace. And it would stay that way forever, like if I just compressed it and shoved it aside. Why does it come back when he lets the magical energies go?

Everest took hold of the door and set it out of the way with his ability to move rock. An elf stuck their head through the hole and looked around curiously. “What’s this?” they demanded, as Lysanias couldn’t tell if the figure was male or female yet.

“A rescue, you stupid elf,” Don told them. “You do want to be rescued, right?”

“Insults right from the start? Classy, Don,” Everest sighed.

“A dwarf? We’ll never live it down!”

“Then remain where you are, you great lump!”

“You’re more of a lump than I am, you rotund shorty.”

“Rotund shorty?” Lysanias whispered to Everest.

“May not know Trade very well.” He called up to the elf. “You two can insult each other all you want when we’re safely away from here. Or do you want to call the guard’s attention?”

Trade? They’re doing a financial transaction? But for what? Are there subtleties I’m not getting here? What could one be buying from the other in this situation? Buying their rescue? But Don isn’t setting a price, he’s just insulting the man for being an elf. Insulting the elf... for being an... I’m missing something here.

“Very well, just a moment.”

Elves started dropping through the hole, and Lysanias was shocked to see how white they were. He sort of thought of himself as “white,” but really he was a dark beige. (Not so much anymore though, his skin hadn’t been tanned by the sun in thousands of years. He just hasn’t really noticed, but he was pretty pale himself.) These people, these elves, were actually white. Various shades of white, true, as their hair had a slightly different tone than their skin or eyes, for instance. But white just the same. They shaded their eyes against the light of the torch and squinted around the area. There was only one woman among them, though it was nearly impossible to tell from just their faces. They all had an androgynous look, their pale skin and the poor light here not helping any. The other nine were male.

“Can’t you turn that thing down?” one asked sourly.

“No, I need it to see!”

“HA! Humans,” one snorted.

“And a thief as well, if those clothes are any indication,” said yet another.

“I didn’t-” *I suppose I accepted them, knowing they were stolen. Even if I didn’t steal them myself.*

“Didn’t what, man?”

How do you make that one word sound scornful? And these used to be angels?
“Didn’t know you would be so picky about who was rescuing you. You’re all welcome to head back up and sit around until they decide what to do with you.”

“We’re talking about the theft of the clothing and armor. That stuff isn’t cheap to make you know.”

Lysanias didn’t know how to respond to that, but he took a little too long to think of a snappy comeback. He had stolen it, but he was also helping rescue them. That was

worth something, right? His inability to keep up the argument was not lost on the elves. But they thought it was something else.

“Shameless,” said one. “Look at him, standing there so cocky.”

“Probably doesn’t know a single word that’s not Trade. He’s now pretending not to understand us.”

“Probably put a bunch of stuff in a cart that is right now on the way to the surface for his own profit.”

“Probably rescued us by accident looking for more to steal, and is now trying to make the best of it.”

“I have not stolen anything beyond these clothes because mine were ruined. Now if you can stop complaining for two seconds, maybe we could get out of here?”

They looked at him like they hadn’t expected him to understand what they were saying. *Maybe I should not have gone that far?*

“Seems he does speak our language,” one remarked.

“And I suppose we should be grateful,” another allowed.

The woman stepped forward. “Quiet, all of you. As we have been rescued, let us not dawdle. However this rescue has been done, let us be away from here.”

“What’s she saying, lad?”

“She wants to be gone from here.”

“Ah, an elf making sense. Get that ceiling repaired and we’ll be on our way.”

“Do we need to? The stone will come back here, right?”

“True, they wouldn’t be able to follow us. Come along then.”

Everest set the block back in place at least, who knows what would have happened if it had been in the space the rock returned to.

Don opened and closed more passageways through the stone, two at a time, until finally he decided they were far enough and turned left. Another two castings and they spilled out into the natural stone passageway.

“Excellent,” he purred. “Worked it out quite precisely for just that short look. Don’t all thank the dwarf at once now. Not just any dwarf could have done all that, you know? Takes a special kind of dwarf, yes it does! Like to see an elf do what I just did, yes I would.”

“What’s he gibbering about?” one of the elves asked Lysanias.

“Uh...”

“More importantly, what are we supposed to do now?” one of the elves asked the woman.

“Perhaps our rescuers have some plan,” she replied, looking over at Don.

“Talk slower, elf. I don’t know very Spidren.”

“You don’t know *much* Spidren,” she automatically corrected.

“You much Drarven you speaking?”

“Do you have a plan or not?”

Don looked to Lysanias.

“She wants to know the plan from here.”

“So tell her! Thinking in Spidren hurts my head.”

“We want to go after the group that took your people back to the annunaki city. We hope to rescue them and with the combined force, retake your land. Then you can figure out how to secure your city while we follow the invasion force to the surface and warn anyone nearby.”

“That meet with approval, princess?” Don asked.

The woman looked between Don and him. “Why can he understand your Spidren but not mine? Perhaps I have a different accent?”

“No, I just...” *How can I most easily explain this? Wait, what did they first say when they met me?* “I have translation magic.”

“Ah. That explains it. So, the plan is to rescue our kin? And all I have to work with

is a bunch of men. Wonderful.”

How are there men or woman? Angels don't have gender. When they become elves did they just sort of randomly get assigned one? What if they got the wrong one? I mean they wouldn't have known what being "male" or "female" was like, how would they have known which to request? So it must have been random, and at least some might have wished for the other after a time. Right? Were they just... stuck?

“Can we really prevail?” asked one of the elves.

“They caught us by surprise before, this time we know what we're dealing with.”

“But mistress, we have no weapons. None of us can use magic. And *these* three cannot stand against these invaders. What are we to do?”

It's not like he's wrong, but did he have to say it like that?

“You think I don't know that? We shall pray to Anansi, She will send us aid once She realizes Her chosen people are in need.”

The men all murmured this was a wonderful idea and knelt around the woman, folding their hands and closing their eyes.

“What are they doing, lad?” Don asked, as if dreading the answer because he knew exactly what they were doing, which he did.

“Praying, apparently.”

“To the Allfather?” he again asked as if he was now desperately hoping the answer was not going to be what he feared.

“Someone named Anansi?”

“Oh that's just wonderful. Don't bother solving your own problems, just think really hard at someone else and hope they come through.”

“I agree,” Everest agreed, glancing back down the tunnel. “We should be moving and catching up to the group. Also we're still a bit close to the town, they could be discovered missing at any time. I don't think we have time for a prayer session.”

“Is what they're doing pointless?”

Don looked sour. “I suppose there's some small chance of this working. Many people put stock in faith and prayer and the like, we dwarves are just a bit more practical.”

“But who is Anansi?”

“Demon lord of spiders,” Everest answered, as if everyone knew *that*.

“They're praying to a demon? Former angels praying to a demon? How is that going to work? You said demons were just wicked humans or angels that fell, right? Those that lived after my time, and went to the plane under this one. How can the soul of a human, no matter how powerful the human was in life, retain enough of that power in death to be helpful to us here? Can that power go through those 'demon gates' you talked about?”

“If it works at all, it will work because these people have the faith it will work. It has nothing to do with gates.”

“Huh?”

“It's a sort of circle,” he explained, drawing one in the dirt of the passageway. “Someone gains followers and those followers begin to revere that being. This gives them power. That reinforces the belief and more followers come, adding to their power. Don't ask how they started revering a demon, I have no idea.”

“People just... Thinking that someone has power gives them power? A powerless person supplying power to another? That can't be-” But Lysanias remembered something. A rule of the Allfather not to worship anything or anyone but Him. *Is that the reason? Did He know that if energies were directed away from Him and towards others, those others would become greater? But didn't He make all the rules of the universe? Why would He make such a rule? He was already the supreme being, He couldn't have wanted more power. And none could match Him, surely, no matter how many followers another gathered. Why not just not put that rule into the fabric of the universe and then not care who people worship.* Then he had a dark thought. *Could that have been there*

before *the Allfather? Like He didn't make the rule? But for something to have existed before Him...* He shuddered. *What would that mean?*

"It seems to," both agreed, pulling him back to the conversation.

Lysanias could only stare as the circle of elves prayed. Minutes passed. Finally the lady elf took a deep breath and opened her eyes. "We are answered!" she cried happily.

Spiders of all shapes and sizes poured past them down the passageway.

Down, And The Confrontation On The Way

When: Just a moment later

Where: Smack in the middle of spider city

While the elves looked joyous and were shouting their thanks to the spider Goddess, Don, Everest, and Lysanias were frozen in place. Small spiders rode larger ones, the largest the size of wolves skittering past quickly. (The ones larger than that were on the ceiling, and they weren't exactly looking up.)

"Come," said the woman. "You will not be harmed. We will go and get our people back."

They had no choice but to follow as she commanded her men to march. And to prepare to be sacrificed when they returned.

"One for each day these spiders assist us," she said.

The men seemed to accept this without complaint and started talking about who should be first.

Lysanias looked over at the others helplessly. He saw them looking back like they had no idea what she had said because they *had no idea what she had said*. He sighed and translated. *What was the point of different languages again?*

"Don't look at me, lad," Don finally said after being told what the lady had said.

"It's the way of prayer," Everest told him. "Everything has a price. Pray to an angel and you might have to give money to the homeless in exchange for knowing your love was safe across the mountains. Pray to a demon though..."

"But sacrifice? And they all seem fine with it."

"Why wouldn't they?" asked the elf woman. "These men are of no importance. They're just laborers, we can always get more. It's the women that were captured that we must worry about."

"They're still alive!"

"At the grace of our Goddess. She has now requested them, and we will not deny Her. Come, if you're so concerned let us not delay and cause more sacrifice than is needed."

Lysanias had no answer for that and moved out with the others, grimly listening to the men discuss how to fairly choose the first sacrifice.

They walked all day, needing to catch up to the group that had been taken earlier. There was a rough staircase carved into the rock just as Yttirus had said, though more than once Lysanias stumbled and had to catch himself, or be caught by one of the others or go tumbling. The elves looked at him with pity, and he could clearly read their faces.

Poor human, can't even walk down a set of stairs without tripping over yourself.

Lysanias was not in any shape for a long march, and struggled to keep up with the group even going down stairs. He was really dreading the climb back up, but knew he couldn't do anything about that at the moment. In reality, the leader of the group, the elf woman who had still not given a name to these "lesser races," was driving the other elves fairly hard. They were farmers, after all, not soldiers. They weren't in much better shape than Lysanias was. Finally the group was forced to stop, and Don grumbled that he wasn't making food for ungrateful elves, so Lysanias carefully did so. Along with water, which he put into large stone depressions he managed to carve out of the rock. They took it as their due, giving the woman first choice, but none saying a word of thanks. One of the elves in particular seemed to bear him a personal grudge, refusing to even look at him. He seemed to feel a particular hatred from that one, and his spirit energy felt odd, but who knew what that could mean.

I think I liked the annunaki better. Though to be fair I've only met the one, and she seemed to be rebelling against her traditions in the first place. She might not be

typical. Or you're just that great. He looked at the bruising on his hands from being scraped on rocks as he caught himself time and again on the staircase. *Yeah, no.*

The spiders stayed at both ends of the staircase, out of the way, and everyone tried to make themselves comfortable on the minor "landing" they had picked to rest on. The stairs not simply going forever, but twisting at a 90 degree angle every fifty steps or so. Then there was a short platform, and then another 90 degree turn and more stairs.

As the non-elves needed a full eight hours rest while the elves needed only four it was decided upon there would be two watch shifts, and our heroes talked softly about what they were going to do.

"Get as good a night's sleep as we can?" Lysanias asked hopefully, legs sore from going down stairs for hours.

"What if they decide they would rather sacrifice us?" Everest asked.

"We should have our own watch!" Lysanias quickly suggested.

"We'll take the first two," Don told him. "You get some rest, lad. You're the one in the most need of it."

He hated to admit this was true, but it was. He was in no shape to stand watch as he was. "Okay. Thanks."

He tried to get comfortable but it didn't take him long to drop off.

Then he was awaked by a sword being driven into his right arm and almost taking it clean off. He cried out in surprise and shock, wondering what was going on.

"Lysanias!" shouted Don, springing up and knocking into the elf, trying to drag him away from his friend's body. At least, that's what he intended, but the elf simply skipped aside and Don didn't get hold of him at all. The elves that were awake looked over, somewhat interested but not really willing to get involved.

Everest looked for a loose stone and found one, sending it sailing at the elf's head but the man didn't even bother to dodge. It splintered off him and he didn't even seem to notice.

"You should be dead!" he shouted to Lysanias, holding the flaming sword aloft. "Dead with the rest of us!"

Through the haze of pain from his arm Lysanias couldn't help but think *Well, we've proven anyone can just grab the sword and not get burnt to a crisp. Guess I'm not all that special after all.*

Everest grabbed a dagger from the sheath at his side and started standing up as Don tried to grab him again. Again he failed to get ahold of the elf but at least he was keeping him off balance and unable to strike again.

With his focus now on Don, Lysanias now pleaded with the mountain spirit to come to his aid. *Help me, mountain spirit, I need you again.*

I hear and come!

The mountain spirit now stood over Lysanias, guarding him and waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Everest couldn't see it and circled around to back Don up, who was trying to grab the elf again. He stuck the elf while Don made another grab. "How are you still alive?" the elf shouted, again easily dodging both. "I'll kill you in the name of our people!"

He's crazy. And neither of them can touch him. Can I do something about that? His arm was throbbing but he knew worse was coming if he didn't stop this insane elf from murdering him. He touched the floor and willed the rock to flow up his feet and legs, hopefully holding him in place so that the others could get that sword away from him. Nothing happened. *Stupid rock!*

The mountain spirit grew in size, becoming twice as large and stepping over Lysanias so it was fully in front of him. The elf swung again, and the spirit tried to disarm him by smashing a fist into the hand holding the sword. It had to do this left handed, as the spirit's right arm was also damaged, so Lysanias sent it energy in addition to its own. The spirit hit the hand and deflected it, but the elf didn't drop the sword.

"How can the spirits still stand to be around you?" sneered the elf. "The Allfather wanted us all dead. I'm just finishing the job He left undone!"

What is this guy going on about?

Don and Everest now tried to grab him from either side, finally succeeding and holding him in place. This allowed Lysanias to reach through the spirit's legs and touch the elf's leg. He willed the elf to become himself, minus hands, and the sword fell from his grasp.

The spirit didn't get fancy, simply punching him in the face with all the force it could muster. Of course the elf tried to dodge again but Don and Everest held on fast, so the spirit connected. The elf went limp but somehow still managed to scream. "My work is not yet done!" The elf seemed to be struggling with itself, and seemed triumphant. "I'll kill you yet!"

"What in the bloody Hell is going on with this elf?" roared Don, still struggling to hold the form.

Everest plunged the dagger into the elf's chest, but was just as baffled as before with the rock when it bounced off.

"Run him through the sword, lad! That might do the job!"

He started to get up and head to where the blade had fallen while the two held him back. "Destroy all progenitors!" shouted the elf, "I've killed many in my time and I'll kill you!" He went into mad laughter, looking around now as if blind. Lysanias was now up, cradling his arm but the mountain spirit was the one to grasp the blade. Holding it in both hands as Lysanias himself would have done, he lunged at the figure, and again Lysanias fed him energy.

The sword sunk into the elf's chest, who screamed "As if that could hurt me!" But then he got a horrified look on his face and screamed in terror. A second figure seemed to appear, trying to escape the fire on the blade but it was pinned somehow, and as the onlookers watched it burned away before their eyes.

The body of the elf finally went limp, and the two let it go. It clattered to the ground with the sword still in the chest and moved no more. The spirit stomped the head flat for good measure.

Guess I had a bit of pent up aggression, he thought, watching it turn the head into paste. He was vaguely nauseated and turned away. The spirit *was* him, in a certain sense, and so he controlled it. But it was also the spirit of the mountain and had its own ideas about things. So while it would act to protect him without him needing to "command" its every move, this proved that even the subconscious mind of Lysanias was helping to drive the spirit's actions.

"Lad, I don't mean any disrespect to you, but being around you is very hazardous to my health. I don't suppose you know what that was?"

"I have no idea," he replied through gritted teeth.

"You're hurt! Can you heal it? Do you have the strength?"

"I may need the knife first."

"You've got plenty of blood there..."

"It has to be drawn with the intent to use. This is no good. Let me concentrate."

The stomping stopped, and the spirit stood by his side as if wanting to know it had done well.

Thank you mountain spirit. Once again you have shown your strength. Please continue to come when I need you. It bowed and vanished.

"Of course."

He concentrated, lost it, then tried again. This time he was able to start the healing process, and everyone watched as the flesh of his arm repaired itself. Finally it was done and he flexed the fingers of his right hand. They seemed fine too.

"No more tonight, would that be too much to ask?" he said, sagging.

"Was that a prayer, lad?" Don asked with a smile, gently lowering him to the

ground.

"You heard him. The Allfather wanted us dead. I doubt He would care about the prayers from one such as I."

"But there are others that might accept you," suggested the elf lady, finally deciding to come over. "I could introduce you to the worship of our Goddess, Anansi."

"Oh, and a fine job helping you did," Don complained to her.

"It seemed to be between my man and yours. I saw no reason to interfere."

"What did she- never mind lad. You just rest. Someone bring that sword- oh for the love of- That weapon to me foot."

"Foot?"

"For crying out- what's the word? Leg?"

"You want me to *hand* it to you?"

"Yes, hand! I *hate* speaking Spidren!"

The lady was not about to be ordered around by a dwarf, so commanded one of the nearer elves to get the sword and hand it back to Don.

"Thank you for your contribution," he said icily.

"Someone get this body out of here," commanded the woman. "You," she chose, pointing. "Take it up the stairs, I'm sure the spiders will know what to do with it. It seems our first sacrifice has been chosen without any input on our part."

Does it work that way? I figured you would have to do the deed yourself. Oh, what do I care anyway?

And he slept again.

He woke with a jerk, looking around wildly.

"Easy, Lysanias. He's awake, Don."

"Eh? What's that? Oh, lad, you're up."

"So can we please get going?" the elf woman impatiently demanded. She was standing there looking like she had waited for hours, and such waiting was totally beneath her.

"How do you feel?" Don asked.

"Oh, great," he remarked, remembering the night before. "I killed my first person last night, almost lost my arm, and don't even know why."

"I don't even know why," Everest told him, handing him the water skin. "If it makes you feel any better."

"Not really," he said, taking a drink. "Wait, did I miss my watch? You should have-

"Lad, if you say 'wake me' I will not speak to you the rest of the day. You needed your rest."

"Thanks. Sorry to be such a burden to you all."

"Make us plenty of gold later and we'll call it even."

"Deal." He looked around, and the elf lady was looking daggers at him. "Yes, I'm up. We're going." He struggled to rise and Don pulled him up with one hand. "I'm hungry." *And starting to see why dwarves don't really like elves.*

Eating on the way down, Everest stepped up next to Lysanias. "So what was that elf screaming at you last night?"

"You couldn't understand him? Of course, and I doubt any elf would tell you."

"Actually, I asked them. Said they didn't know either. Wasn't any language they knew."

"Really?" He went down a few more steps. "Do you think they were lying?"

"They must have known you would tell me later."

"True. It was saying some odd stuff. Like we were all supposed to be dead. And how it was going to finish the job."

"All us?" He indicated the group.

"No, all me. Called me a progenitor. Seemed to know me, or knew that I was born before the flood. Wanted to kill me 'in the name of our people.' Ring any bells?"

The elf woman glanced in his direction, but shook her head thinking she misheard.

He thought for a moment. "Can't say it does."

"Great. I'm just worried it'll happen again."

"At least we know the sword works, if nothing else," Don put in.

"True. My spirit hit him pretty hard I thought. But he just kept going. He even scoffed at the sword, but something burned away from him."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Everest decided.

"Well, no, you wouldn't have to," Don chided him. "It was after Lysanias here."

"What I mean is," he went on, shooting Don a dark look, "that if there was going to be another attack, it would have happened last night, when you were weakened by the first one."

"I guess. I hate to put you at risk, though."

"Lad, we're marching down endless steps with a bunch of spiders and elves to rescue more elves from a bunch of lizard men. Of our own free will."

"So you're saying we've gone insane?" Everest asked, curious. "Cave gas got to us or something?"

"I'm saying our lives are pretty risky no matter where we go, or what we do. So don't worry about it."

"You can worry a little for my sake, if you want," Everest offered.

"Thanks. I'll do that."

So I've killed. It was in self-defense, sure. And maybe that elf would have been the one to die as a 'sacrifice' but that wasn't my call. How am I supposed to react to this? Who do I talk to about what it means? Should I just forget about it? Say a prayer for the soul of that elf? Do elves even have souls? Where would they have come from, being angels originally? Would their essence of being an angel become the soul of the body that now became somewhat mortal? Is that elf now in the afterlife or did it just vanish? Would the soul be claimed by that spider Goddess they prayed to, because it was killed while the spiders helped and thus the "sacrifice?" There's just too many unanswered questions.

He repaired the tear in his clothing and made sure he was totally healed, which he was. Then he concentrated on not falling down any stairs today on the way to who knew where. Down and turn, down and turn, he was starting to wonder if this was some kind of nightmare, that he was still on that stone slab asleep, and this was simply the latest dream he was having.

But the stairs were not endless, and near the end of the next day the group of rescuers caught up with the group of prisoners. For a variety of reasons, the one group had been moving quite slowly in comparison to the other. For one they were lizard people, and just didn't move all that fast as a group. They were partially sustained by magic, and there wasn't a lot of that around here further weakening them. The elves were not cooperating which slowed them further, and quite honestly they didn't expect any resistance from behind. The one driving all this was far away so his hold was slipping, realistically from their point of view they had no real reason to hurry. So they didn't.

The screams of the annunaki were heard first as the spiders descended upon the group, and the elves rushed to their aid. The spider's aid, not the annunaki's. When they rounded the stairs they saw the annunaki trying to attack them with some sort of hand held beam weaponry or magic, but there were dozens of every size. The elves had no weapons, but rushed forward to add to the confusion, and our heroes went among the captives, cutting bonds and smashing the chains that held the elves prisoner. They had been chained in a line, as of course walking side by side was impossible in these tight

stairwells. Once free they leapt up the stairs, and the others quickly followed.

“Our spider kin will feed well this day,” one of the newly rescued women said to the woman who had been traveling with them. “You were wise to bring them.”

“Thank you, leader.” Lysanias got the feeling she used some term here to indicate ‘leader’ but that’s how it translated.

“And these... others? Mercenaries you hired? I mean a dwarf, really?”

The woman hung her head. “They discovered us and rescued us, leader. I think we owe them all our lives?”

“Did they now? As for what we owe them, I’m sure Anansi will reward them at some future time. Come along everyone, back to the city.”

She swept up the stairs as if going to a ball, ignoring Lysanias and the others.

Lysanias watched her go with a rising fury, and Don put a hand on his shoulder. “Let her go, lad. It’s just their way. And who knows, maybe this Anansi will reward us in some way later.”

“Somehow that is not a comfort. We risked our lives, trooped all the way down here-”

“You don’t have to tell me, lad. I expected nothing less, and I did try to warn you. Come on, we don’t want to be left behind when those spiders decide they’ve had enough of those below.”

Lysanias envisioned the mind numbing and physically exhausting climb up to the city and thought maybe that was his punishment for having killed the elf. It was going to feel like a punishment.

“Buck up,” Everest told him, slapping him on the back. “At least you have a cute girl waiting for you up there.”

But somehow that raised his spirits only a little as he climbed the first step back towards the elven city.

Lysanias was not doing well. His recent injury had left him further weakened than he normally would have been, and climbing stairs is exhausting work. Normally the elves would have looked down on the 'weak little human' but these elves had been mistreated by the annunaki for several days before their march down the stairs began. So they also needed frequent rests. Lysanias was breathing heavily and trying to ignore the burning in his legs when Don turned to him.

"Really must apologize to you, lad," he began.

"For what?"

"Letting that elf get that close to you. He was just wandering around, seemed interested in your sword but I never dreamed he would grab it and try to murder you as you slept."

"That's it right there, isn't it? You can't be on watch against people you're supposed to be trusting. If they had wanted to make us the sacrifice there would have been signs. Hushed whispers and glancing in our direction. This was just a random attack by someone that apparently went mad."

"It's kind of you to say. But I still feel a bit guilty about it."

Lysanias waved this away. "Save your energy for the climb. We still have a long way to go."

He looked up the staircase, imagining the climb still to come. "Isn't that the truth?"

"How do you think they made all these stairs?" Everest asked, sitting down next to them.

"Magic, maybe? They probably weren't made overnight. This project could have taken them months. We don't know how far down they live."

"Maybe a variant of your spell, Don?" Lysanias asked.

"One that was more permanent? Could be lad. Could be. Very few permanent spells like that though, at least how we use magic."

"Could they use it differently?" *Where would the stone go if it's not reappearing when the magic is released?*

"Who knows? I've never heard of beings like this, they could have been living underground since before the chaos moon's arrival. So their civilization never fell and their understanding of magic is much greater than ours. I mean where would they have come from otherwise?"

"Great. We get wiped out again and again, they live snug in their underground cities for who knows how long."

"Let's get moving!" shouted one of the elf women.

Lysanias just groaned.

Finally the endless climb was over. Lysanias staggered and fell to his knees at the last step.

"You made it lad, don't give out on me now."

"I want to sleep for a week."

He snorted. "No time for that. We have to see if your girlfriend cleared the city or not, or if they're all still waiting for us over there."

"Not my girlfriend," he drowsily muttered.

"Regardless, you have to go first because if she didn't, hopefully she took guard duty here. An elf she would probably attack no matter what. But you would probably be okay."

"Probably?"

"They change their minds sometimes you know. Women."

"Like you don't," Everest reminded him.

"Totally different thing."

"Uh huh."

"Very well." He was helped up and crept down the passageway. Don and Lysanias followed.

Wait, how am I going to know it's her? It could be another of her race... Duh only she would be wearing those clothes, right? And their eyes are better, at least at seeing in the dark. Whoever is there will see me coming before I see them. If they raise an alarm I know it's not her.

It was her.

She ran over to them, seeming impressed. "So, you did it. Or did you give up and come back?"

"We rescued them. But really, I was just along for the ride. The spiders did everything."

"Oh, that's where they went. We did wonder."

"We?"

"Ah. Yes. About that... I tried to get them to leave, I really did!"

"Why didn't they?"

"None of them wanted to report to our 'great leader' they had let the elves escape. Seems they're a bit concerned what he might do to them."

"So they're just pretending to guard a bunch of elves? How is that better for them?"

"Not even all that seriously. They're basically just hanging out. They figure no one will be back from the surface because they'll all be dead, or they're coming back to say they won. Either way it won't matter at that point. As long as they keep anyone from passing through to warn the surface, their job will still have been done. They won't face punishment for letting the elves escape, not when they didn't go to the surface. So the tunnels out of the farm are still guarded."

"Great." *But couldn't the elves have taken a different route to the surface and warned people? Probably best not to bring it up.*

"It's great?" asked Don hopefully. "So the village is ours again?"

Oh great, I get to be a translator again. Yay. He looked down at his friend with a "do you really think it would be that easy" look.

He got the message and his face fell. "Perhaps not."

"How many?" he asked tiredly.

"Fourteen. Wait, spiders? You mean they got eaten?"

"Sorry," he apologized, meaning it. "The elves prayed to their Goddess and all the spiders came with us. Have you ever tried to talk a spider out of eating somebody?"

She looked a bit sad. "I see. I guess you couldn't help it. Prayer though? That's weird, but I guess beside the point how it happened. They were outnumbered, had no weapons or magic. I suppose I have to acknowledge their resourcefulness at the very least."

"I guess. It was pretty awful though."

"Are they planning the same thing here?"

He shook his head. "They stayed. Probably to properly digest their meal, I don't know how spiders eat. Or maybe they are no longer under the control of Anansi? In any case we left them behind. We'll have to think of something else."

"Good. I don't want to watch my people getting eaten by giant spiders."

And they probably wouldn't distinguish the 'good' one from the 'bad' ones. So you would probably wind up getting eaten too. "We'll come up with a plan to try and take them out without hurting them too much."

"I appreciate it."

"You still won't help us?"

"I'm only one person. Even if I did, it wouldn't change your odds in the least."

"Maybe. You have more magic than we do I bet. You could be a great help."

"I am being a great help. I'm not raising the alarm that you're back."

I guess that's the most we can expect. "I can't deny that. Let me go talk to the others, I'll be back in a bit."

"Okay." She turned away but then turned back. "I will tell you this much. We have a three shift rotation. Right now four are probably asleep. If you could get them taken care of the next shift wouldn't miss them because they would be relieved normally. Then you could take those four out. Do it quietly enough and you would only have five to actually deal with." She then turned and went back to her post.

"From your half the conversation I take it the situation is less than ideal?" Everest asked.

"Do you call needing to take out fourteen fully armed and magic wielding warriors after having walked up those thousands of steps ideal?"

"Not especially no."

"Then you are correct."

"Better go tell the elves," Don figured with a frown. "Maybe they'll have some ideas. And if a few of them get killed taking their city back, well, it's not that big a loss."

"I told her we would try this without killing her people."

"What did you go and do that for?"

"We need her on our side! If we convince her we can be trusted by keeping our word and not just killing her people that might do it. We need to know what their plans are. How they plan to accomplish them. Where they're going next. She might know."

"I don't deny that, but it's going to be hard enough."

"We're already at a disadvantage. If it came to a fight we would not be able to win. They have no weapons," he gestured back to the elves. "or magic. We have to do this quietly and avoid fighting at all costs."

"True. The three of us can't take down five times our number, Don," Everest admitted. "You certainly don't have attack magic."

"We plan then. I wish you had asked her what they're doing at the moment. How spread out they are. Have they made fortifications? What kind of weapons are they using?"

"Sorry for not being an expert in battle strategy," he snapped. "The most violence we ever saw was defending our towns from nephilim. And that wasn't exactly a kid's job!"

"I know lad, I know. I don't mean to disparage you. Plus we're all exhausted, it's not an ideal solution, like you said. Let's go see what the elves have to say."

"So we can either abandon our city or try to take it back by force," said the elf matriarch. "But without weapons, armor, or knowing the true capabilities of those that hold the city currently."

"That's right. And you have to do it without killing any of them. Or at least killing as few as possible, if we want her help later."

"Human, we will be hard pressed to even get near the city before they wipe us out from a distance with their magic. To believe we could kill even a fraction of them is overestimating even our abilities. However, if this one is willing to let us pass unhindered, our odds do improve." She paused, then considered thoughtfully. "Perhaps if we can capture a few we could bargain for their release in exchange for them all leaving? That would honor your bargain with her."

"Yes it would. Is that what you suggest we try?"

"Let me think a moment." She did. "What if we simply threw sticky web over their eyes? They would not be able to target their magic in that case. We have plenty of that

in storage to be woven.”

“The one random one we fought escaped using magic. Walked through the wall. Would they need to see themselves to do something like that? Cast personal magic?”

“Ah, no. And we must assume what one can do they all can do. Tell me, what do you all bring to this fight? Besides a flaming sword, I mean. What about those two?”

“Don is a dwarf, he knows a few spells but no real attack magic. Everest is a gnomad. He can move rock with his mind. And don’t depend on me, I’m terrible with a sword and my other skills. I’m really just a kid, despite what I look like.” *And totally out of my element, by the way. I have been doing pretty well though, so my parents must have done something right, huh?*

“Tell me everything you can do, down to the last spell. We must come up with a plan. Who knows what might be useful.”

So he told her about the rotation, and what spells Don had, and how he had gotten through the farm the first time. How the one at the entrance was willing to look the other way in return for going after her father and finding out the truth about their leader. How valuable he thought her ultimate assistance would be, and how he could best use his meager abilities.

“And you say this ‘contain ward’ of yours could be made with nothing else but some paper, ink, and a brush? And then any one of us could use it?”

“That’s right. But I’m not going to be able to make many of them. I’m exhausted from climbing those steps.”

“We would only need four now, then another four after the guard changes. With eight of them hostage, the other five may decide to simply leave. Especially if pressed by the one willing to let us though.”

“There’s another problem. I don’t think these wards will hold them all that long. I’m not very good at this stuff, as I keep telling people. And capturing living things in them is different than just objects. I hadn’t done it before, but the person that taught me to do it had. He said it varied, but whatever he put in came out on its own in the end.”

“I think I can take care of that issue as well. What about a ‘holding cell’ of sorts? It could be made by your dwarf friend with his spell. Slip the pieces of paper into a crack in the ground that leads to an open area. Even walking through walls would not help them in that case!” She looked triumphant, like she had solved everything.

“Except I’ve already seen her escape from something just like that. When we arrived she just wished herself out of the hole we were hiding in.”

“Oh. Still, they would hold for an hour or so, yes?”

“I can’t promise you more than that to be safe. But at least that long, yes.”

“Then we still have a chance. If she is willing to tell us when the guard is about to change we can strike. Hide while the guard changes, then hope the others go right to sleep. Take them prisoner before the hour is up. That should hold them for at least the time needed to treat with the others.”

“Threaten to kill those we’ve captured unless they leave? I suppose they wouldn’t know our capabilities any more than we know theirs. It could work.”

“Then our first task is to get you your supplies. I have what you require, I use paper and ink for my record keeping and such. If I can reach my house unseen I can get them for you.”

No more blood wards! Never thought I would be so happy to hear of the possibility of just getting some simple ink and paper. “Is your place far?”

“Second house across the way, straight out of the tunnel from here.”

“Hopefully that’s not too much of a problem. Let’s go talk to Yttrius.”

“There’s at least three people walking a random circuit,” Yttrius explained. “But it’s a pretty big cave. If you’re careful they might not see you. They could feel your energy though, can you hide that?” Lysanias translated the question and she nodded. *Hey, we have the same yes or no convention with head gestures! That’s odd.* “Okay. I

mean you're kind of white, but the cave is pretty dark. It's only that glowing moss that's everywhere that lets us see at all. And there isn't a lot of line of sight, it could work."

Lysanias relayed this information.

"We tried to make it grow everywhere. It's for the spiders, we can see perfectly in the dark."

He relayed this.

"Good for her. Shift change is in," she consulted her padform, "two and a half hours, give or take a few minutes. I can alert you when it's about time."

"Couldn't she go get the supplies?" the elf asked. "It would attract far less attention."

"Would you be willing to get them?"

"Not really. I'm glad you want to do it that way, but pretending you don't exist through here is all I'm prepared to do at the moment."

"She isn't."

"Then it falls to me. I will return shortly." She closed her eyes and concentrated, nodded as though satisfied, and stealthily made her way forward. Lysanias also felt her spiritual energy diminish as she vanished from the bubble of torchlight. He now could only tensely wait for her return.

"Bet you a gem she gets caught!" Yttrius whispered excitedly. She brought out a necklace from her shirt and dangled it before him. It was a small blue gem of some kind.

So they have that concept as well? When we were kids we would always bet things to see who was faster or bet someone would or wouldn't do something, like jump from that tree into the water. "I don't have anything of equivalent value to bet," he said sadly. "I don't really have anything of any value actually. I literally woke up less than two weeks ago after thousands of years asleep. My only possession is the sword. And I think that was stolen." He paused. "The person that made it probably isn't going to come looking for it now though." He chuckled.

"Your kind can enter hibernation too? How about that!" She put the gem back. "Guess you got stuck, huh? That happens sometimes, glad you snapped out of it. Maybe we could compare histories when this is resolved? I know! We bet histories! Whoever loses has to tell theirs."

Hibernation? Can these people do on their own what my family did to me with wards? There's just so much about them I don't know. Heck, there's a lot about everything I don't know. But winning her history could be interesting, and I don't mind telling mine... "Done."

"Done." She held out her hand, palm up.

He looked at it. "I'm not sure what the appropriate response is. I don't want to give offence."

She laughed and tilted her head back, showing those pointed teeth again. *She laughs just like us, her legs felt soft against mine, but there are those teeth again to remind me she could turn on me in a second. I have to remember to be careful around her. She may be willing to help us to get what she wants, but she is not yet a friend.*

"Just put your hand on mine," she said patiently. He did, and she flipped it over and back again. "There. Now it's official."

"It's official," he repeated as she took her hand down. *Don and Everest have that little hand game they do to choose who is going to do things. These people have a hand gesture to seal a deal. We all laugh. We play little games to pass the time and make things more interesting. We're curious about each other. Are the differences or the commonalities between us greater?*

The pair didn't have to wait long, the elf matriarch returned with the supplies they needed, along with a sack. "There was one in my house, asleep," she reported. "But I grabbed what I could. Some small weapons, all the paper I had on hand, ink, some other minor items."

"Great. I'll get started right away." He turned to Yttrius and grinned. "You can tell

me your history later.”

She nodded. “As agreed. But I’ll want a chance to bet for yours!”

“Deal. See you soon.”

So Lysanias went back down the tunnel and started work on four contain wards. While he couldn’t put energy into them directly, at least not more than the minor amount needed to make them function, he could concentrate carefully on their creation. *If only I had my reference guide, that would be far better than me trying to recall this design from memory. I’ll just have to do my best. At least we’re using them on sleeping people, that should help.*

He felt he remembered the design fairly well, surprisingly well in fact, and set about work. One looked a bit rougher than the others, but he felt it would function. The nearest elves had watched somewhat interestedly as he made them, not having seen anything like it themselves. He handed them out (3 woman and the matriarch were chosen, of course) and explained how they worked. “Just slap them on something and will that something to be stored inside the ward. Being asleep your targets should offer no resistance so you shouldn’t need to knock them in the head or anything.”

“And they won’t register as magical?” asked one, holding it up to her eye.

“Not magical at all,” he replied. “This is a construct of spiritual energy, nothing more.”

“Astonishing.”

“Thanks. Now, if there’s nothing else I’m going to try and get some sleep before I have to make the next set.”

“Actually,” one of the elves spoke up, “it would be better if you stayed awake in case something went wrong. You are the only one that can understand the invader, if she comes to tell us something. If you would like, I could guide you through a meditative exercise which would be nearly as good.”

“That would be fine,” he agreed.

“Very well.” The others drifted away, waiting for the time Yttrius said was best to strike. “First, sit comfortably and close your eyes...”

Time ticked by, and Lysanias relaxed under the guidance of the elf. The hour rolled around and Yttrius came to tell them the guard would change soon, so if they were going to strike, now was the time!

Talking Sense

Where: Outskirts of the spider silk farm

When: Lysanias has meditated for about two hours

Lysanias had to admit the meditation the elf had guided him through had been effective. His legs didn't hurt so much, he felt a bit better and his head was clear. The four elves disappeared into the cave past Yttrius to hopefully capture the first group. He watched them go, standing next to her, and knew he should get busy on the next four. *But first...*

"Want to go double or nothing?" he asked.

"Ooooh!" She looked at him with a smile, eyes shining. "What did you have in mind?"

"I want to learn not only about you, but your people. I bet that if all four of them come back, uncaptured but having captured someone, you tell me not only about your history but answer questions about your people too."

"All four? Confident, aren't we? Well, well, I'll agree to that. But in exchange, I get your history and a personal favor from you in the future."

"That's rather open ended, don't you think?"

"That's what makes it fun!" She stepped a little closer, looking into his eyes. "So, do we have a deal?"

"As long as it's not illegal or anything..."

"Of course not. Who do you think I am?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out!"

She laughed. "That's true enough. So?"

He held his hand up as she had. "Deal."

She put her hand on his formally and they flipped it.

"Deal. I have to get to work making the next wards. See you in a bit."

"See you."

By the time Lysanias had completed two of the next wards, the elf women were back.

"Be careful," one cautioned the others as they slipped the wards into the "holding cell" Don had made. "I think they can sense energy. One came straight for me, I had to dive behind a spider pen and hide. They finally went away."

So it was close, but I won again. Nice. Wonder what the favor would have been?

"Good job," praised the matriarch. "And to you, human. You don't seem useless after all."

"Thanks," he replied sourly, starting the third one. "Have to be careful next time, they may be more alert if the one told the others he sensed something. Good thing you're good at hiding."

She ignored the barb. "We aren't called 'ghost' elves for nothing, I suppose. I do have to wonder though, can't you make these any faster?"

He shook his head. "Ten minutes each. Even people that have been making them for years take that time. It just takes that long for the spiritual energy to take hold, I guess?"

"How strange. That writing looks familiar too." She was holding one up and looking at it. Symbols and words covered the carefully folded and torn sheet he was using to hold the power, relating to the function of the ward.

"It's what I just call my language. I don't know what you would call it. No one taught it to me, I could always just read and write it. The angels that showed us how to make wards used it, so we used it too."

"Angles showed you this? That means this is Enochian? You speak Enochian?"

"I... Guess?" he hedged. *Enochian. I'll have to remember that.*

"No wonder we can all understand you. What are you? You're no human, that's for sure. Are you angelic, just disguised and walking among mortals for some reason?"

"I'm human, believe me. What else would I be?" *That elf called me "progenitor." But what does that even mean? Are humans more limited now? Why? Did they forget what they could do or did later generations of kids from the survivors just lose the ability to do what I can? But why lose language skills? That should have been passed down if nothing else.*

"I'm starting to wonder." She set it back down. "Let me know when you're done and we can make our second attempt."

"Of course."

What am I? When I meet other humans will they even recognize me as one of them? The elves thought I was human, but they probably don't have much contact. How much have we changed since I went into that cave? Will I be welcome anywhere?

With the next two done it had been forty minutes, more than enough time for the next guards to fall asleep. There was, however, a new problem. Yttrius couldn't exactly remain at her post without arousing suspicion, so there was a new annunaki on guard at their tunnel. This one which was alert, or at least was assumed to be.

"It's too risky," Don assured them, when asked about getting out the same way they got in. "We can't use my tunneling magic. I'm already maintaining the prison in case they get out of the wards. I would have to do at least two more castings, that means maintaining three at a time. The third casting would be almost impossible, even taking extra time to shape the magic. I backfire it and we're all going to learn what actually being a stone feels like."

"So we must get through that guard before they alert the others," said the matriarch. "Could you use the stone method again?"

"It did work before," agreed Lysanias, looking at Everest.

"I'm fairly confident in my accuracy, but Yttrius was distracted. We can't assume this one will be."

"He cautions that we would only get one shot. If he dodged the rock it would be all over."

"Not necessarily," she offered. "Tell me, could these wards be attached to stones? If they struck would they work the same way?"

"I supposed. Why?"

"Could all four be thrown at once? That would increase our chances that one would be successful."

"What about it, Everest? Could you manage four small stones instead of just one?"

"Probably? But I have a better idea." He was looking Lysanias over critically. Or more accurately, the sword.

"What's that?"

"Last time we threw it because we wanted to try knocking Yttrius out. So I aimed for her head, as hard as I could. She said "ow" but didn't go unconscious or anything."

"Probably her scaly skin?"

"Maybe. The point is, my range is pretty good. The problem is seeing that far down the cave in the dark."

"Okay?"

"If you would let me borrow your sword, and can put a ring of stone around the hilt, I can float both it and the ward down to the guy. That way I could see it, but the guard probably wouldn't notice. They would be looking at the flaming sword coming towards them- carried by nobody."

"They might totally panic!"

"That's the hope. At least be distracted enough to not notice the small piece of paper coming towards them."

"That's a much better idea." He drew the sword. "Take it. Just don't lose it, it's the only thing I really own of my own." He started looking around for a rock he could put a hilt sized hole in.

"Of course."

"What's going on?" asked the elf, confused.

He told her the plan.

"I think that can be done. Let us try it. But those of us with weapons will stand ready to rush him, should this plan not work out."

So the flaming sword bobbed down the passageway, as though carried by an invisible hand. The annunaki stood transfixed, eyes wide as the blade approached. He reached for something at his side and drew it out, not making any sudden movements. The passageway lit up with two silvery beams that melted the rock it hit but missed the blade, as he was trying to shoot at the "person" carrying it. He started backing away, up against the wall of the cave as the sword floated before him. That's when the piece of paper that was floating above him, secured to a rock with a bit of long elven hair, fell and touched his head.

And the annunaki was gone.

The sword zipped back to Lysanias' waiting hand and the ward quickly followed, being shoved down into the slot of the prison.

I never realized when I learned that ward on a whim it would turn out to be so handy.

"Now for the others, and we retake our farm," said the matriarch, heading down the passageway.

The sleeping three were swiftly taken care of and shoved into the prison, leaving one wandering around and three guarding the various passageways. Yttrius was peeking out of a door and saw them coming back, so went to join them.

"Tell her to gather her people," the elf commanded. "We will make our demands."

Through me, of course. "She wants to talk to the guards that remain," he told her. "Can you go get them?"

"I can, but I doubt they'll back down. That's your problem though."

"I know. Thanks."

A wary group of annunaki gathered in the center of the village. All the elves were now there, though none looked all that impressive as most were unarmed.

"Tell them what I'm saying, and take no liberties," commanded the elf in charge.

"Yes matriarch," said Lysanias.

"We have captured the bulk of your forces," he translated for her. "Unless you leave this place without delay we will destroy them. If you do, none will be harmed and they will be returned to you one at a time."

"Who are you to threaten us?" one demanded, lifting his beam pistol. He was taller than Yttrius, probably a male, and brighter colored. His feathers were blue and he seemed to have some sort of metal rods strapped to his limbs. These issued from a backpack sized lump on his back, giving him a sort of external skeleton.

"I am Jelimaris, matriarch of this elven tribe. Who are you to come here and disrupt our way of life?"

"I'm the one with the beam weaponry!"

"I do not care what weaponry you claim to possess. Can you kill all of us before we overwhelm you? Can this 'beam' save your friends, our prisoners? This is not all of us. Those that remain behind will start killing your fellows if you do not follow our demands."

"They can take care of themselves. As for taking you all out, probably."

"I think you underestimate us at your peril. We are elves, and we will not fall easily."

"I don't care what you call yourselves. I shoot you with this and you're going

down.”

“So do it then! Take your chance. Or are you a lowly guard of passageways and can’t think for yourself?”

Wow, gutsy lady. I hope she knows what she’s doing. And they don’t just shoot the translator.

The annunaki grumbled and stepped back, still covering the elves. He got the other in a circle and started a hushed conversation with them. Jelimaris stood there, looking unconcerned and as if her life were not in deadly danger.

“Oh, enough of this!” shouted Yttrius, pulling her own beam pistol. She activated it and swept it in a line across the ground. She stepped over it to where the elves were.

“What are you doing?” demanded the one that had been talking.

“Look at yourselves!” she screamed at them. “Look at what you’re doing! Threatening unarmed... Farmers? Taking bets on how many each of you can take down? I’m disgusted with all of you.”

“You can’t speak to me like that!”

“I’ll speak to you however I like. We’re annunaki. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“It’s because I’m annunaki that I’m here. We’re finally on the road to retaking the surface.”

“With less than a hundred people? Really? I don’t care how superior our technology is, we can’t fight the entire surface. But that’s not the point.”

“So what is?”

“We’re supposed to be a superior race. The original race, of culture and magic and learning. Where is the culture here? Where is the learning? Look at these people! They live in natural rock formations and harvest spider webs. They don’t have roads or computers or anything. Where is the glory in subjugating them?”

“We have our orders.”

“So we do! Do they even make sense? Our ‘great leader’ won’t tell us his plan. Do you even know his name? I don’t. He won’t tell us. Why?”

“He keeps many secrets. Such as the locations of our secret caches of troops-”

“Oh come on. Do you really believe that fairy tale? If there were all these millions of troops sleeping somewhere, why would they be there in the first place? Why not just take the surface instead of putting them to sleep? What was served by doing that?”

“I... It’s...”

“Oh, our leaders are always ‘soon, we’ll march on the surface’ and ‘one day the whole world will be ours again’ but nothing is ever done. Hundreds of thousands of years have gone by, if what I learned in school is even accurate. If it hasn’t been done by now, it’s never going to be done.”

“It’s being done now! That’s why we’re here!”

“Without government backing? Without heavy weaponry? Just our tiny group is going to manage it, is that it? Here’s a little thought morsel for you; what if despite all that, we actually win?”

“What?”

“What if? We. Win? Do you see any infrastructure here? Power lines? Teleport nexus? Binary load lifters? No! Who do you think is going to bring all that up to the surface? You want to rebuild our entire civilization a hundred kilometers up? Do you know how long that’s going to *take*? Even we’ll be old and dead before it gets halfway done! Think!”

“I... I thought maybe slaves-”

“*Slaves?*” she screeched. “Now you’re talking about taking slaves? Us? Is that really where we’re headed? We’re supposed to be the enlightened race. The race everyone looks up to. Is taking slaves really elevating us?”

“They’re just... vermin.” He indicated the elves. “Why not enslave them? We’d

give them a better life.”

“How do you know?”

“Know?”

“Yes, know. That they’re ‘vermin?’ Did you talk to them? Try to teach them anything, see if they could learn it? Put some kids through our schools, see if they could keep up?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“Of course not,” she parroted. “So you don’t know. You just accepted it and followed some madman up to the surface. Where he put you to work watching a tunnel. Some ‘great endeavor’ that turned out to be, right? Do you really feel you’re contributing here? Or do you feel just cast aside? Used and discarded like we don’t even matter.”

“You’re doing this because you’re *bored*?”

“I’m doing this,” she explained patiently, “because I’ve actually been talking to these people. I got kind of forced into it, but it got me thinking. Trying to figure out why *now* this guy nobody knows shows up out of nowhere and decides, on his own, he’s going to retake the surface. They’re not stupid. This one,” she pointed to Lysanias, “can seemingly understand all languages, but has no magic I can detect on his person. He helped capture our people by writing on paper. Again, not magic. He carries around a sword that’s literally *on fire*. Not magic! They have powers or science that could equal ours. We have a place to live, a great place! Why would we need any other place, especially one so far from our real home?”

He looked helplessly to the others. One shrugged. *Another gesture we seem to share?* “I started to question our orders once our ‘great leader’ left. Why do we even call him that? Who told us to?”

The others had no answer.

“We can’t just leave,” the leader weakly protested.

“Why not?” asked a third. “I mean, like she said, we came here sort of randomly, after hearing that guy’s speech. At least I did. We aren’t soldiers or anything, not in any real military unit. Even assuming the ‘great leader’ succeeds, does he even know our names? I doubt it. He would never find us.”

“And he would be too busy running stuff up there to bother,” put in the fourth. “We would just be more faces in the crowd. What would we be charged with? I think we’re more breaking the law now than we would by going back.”

“I suppose we would be considered terrorists, doing this on our own,” agreed the second one. “Letting the surface know we exist could work against any future effort. They might decide to fortify any tunnel leading to the surface and make future invasion more difficult. We could be punished for that.”

The one in front looked at his pistol and over at the elves, who of course had no idea what these people were shouting about. “What is the point?” he muttered. “Very well,” he allowed, stuffing the pistol back. “I guess we’re leaving.”

Lysanias let out a breath and relaxed, then slid his sword back into the sheath.

“Negotiations are over, then?” Jelimaris asked dryly.

“Yes. I think she convinced them to leave.”

“We’re leaving,” agreed the one. “Were are the others?”

Wary of some trick, Lysanias led them to the ‘prison’ and started tearing the wards up, one at a time. Each one was disarmed and sent on their way down the passage. After about six Lysanias belatedly remembered the spiders were down in that direction, wouldn’t that cause problems?

“Oh, they’ve eaten by now,” he was assured by Jelimaris. “They won’t be bothered.”

He had no choice but to accept this.

“It really is just paper,” one of the annunaki said, holding up an untorn ward. “I don’t feel magic on it at all. Spiritual energy, yes. But no magic. Astonishing.”

"It's just a ward," he protested. "They were all over the place when I was a kid. Everyone learned a least a few because they're so useful."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Odd."

Finally the last one was let go and marched off. The four insisted on taking their weapons "so they didn't fall into the wrong hands" according to them, and went on their way. *Not like we would know how to use or maintain them in any case.* Of course, Yttrius had to explain she was going with the others to the surface, to get her father back and find out the answers to the questions she had posed.

"You're going to travel with *them*?"

"Yes. They won't contaminate me or anything, don't worry."

"They're just so... primitive."

"You've never gone camping? Besides, it'll be interesting to learn about their way of life."

Yeah, you and me both, given I don't really have one.

"Your choice I guess."

Finally they were gone, and the elves went to go see how the farm had fared. Of course they needed their spiders back, but they had work to do in the meantime.

"That was amazing," Lysanias said to Yttrius, now that their group of travelers was back together. "You made them back down. And no one got hurt!"

"I just got so angry at them, acting like that," she explained. "Gave them a piece of my mind, anyway. I'm just glad they didn't decide to shoot me."

"Me too. It was quite a risk you took."

"Oh, I don't know about that. They were wavering already, I could tell."

I couldn't. They looked pretty serious to me. But then, you would know better.

"So I guess tomorrow we head to the surface? Do you know how close it is?"

None of his party did, they all shook their heads. "We can ask tomorrow. For now, let's see about a place to sleep for the night. Maybe I can avoid being stabbed tonight and get a good night's sleep."

"You got stabbed?"

"I'll tell you the whole story. Tomorrow."

And he went to find a place to sleep.

Getting To Know You

When: The next day after many hours of sleep

Where: On the road again

Don had let Lysanias sleep as long as he wanted, despite the elves rather annoyed looks and not-so-subtle suggestions they should get moving if they wanted to catch the invasion force that had left. The spiders had returned and been corralled again, so at least they were busy with that most of the time. Yttrius they pretended didn't exist, and she stayed out of the way. She was part of the invasion force, after all, despite just being dragged along by her now absent father. Not that they knew that, just that Lysanias said she shouldn't be harmed, so they ignored her.

Of course, she couldn't exactly talk to anyone there so she rightly didn't press the issue.

But finally Lysanias was up, had eaten, and was now on the first leg of the several day journey to the surface. No elf had thanked the party, no words of parting or gifts were given. In fact, Lysanias could have sworn one woman was about to demand the clothes and armor back as they made their way through the town to get to the exit tunnel. But she thought better of it and the group left without fanfare. But when he looked back she was glaring at him.

"Not exactly the sendoff a bunch of heroes deserve," he remarked to Don.

"I'm sure they were smiling on the inside," he suggested.

"Almost hope those annunaki come back and take the place over again," Everest remarked, shooting a glance at Yttrius. "That would show them."

"Now, now, be nice," Don admonished. "But if their spiders happen to come down with stomach problems from eating the invaders and started puking all over the place..."

"If the elves contracted some annoying but not fatal disease from the annunaki that happened to crop up every few weeks..."

"If maybe the spiders had gotten a taste for flesh and started trying to escape every night, and the elves found themselves awakening to spider mandibles above them every other day..."

"Okay, okay," Lysanias protested. "I see why you don't like elves, let's not wish further calamity against them. Give it a rest."

"Why, want to talk to your girlfriend? It's several days on the road, you've got plenty of time."

"I think we embarrass him, Don. Even though she can't understand our witty banter, he doesn't want to be seen with a pair of salt of the earth types like us. Taints the old image, what ho? He's moving up in the world with his hoity toity girlfriend, wants to leave the nest as it were."

"They grow up so fast," Don replied, wiping an imaginary tear.

"I really need to learn their language, don't I?" Yttrius asked no one in particular.

Later that day Yttrius brought up the subject of her past. Lysanias hadn't known how to broach the subject, just walking beside her in silence.

"So what did you want to know about me?" she asked.

"You know, whatever," he shyly said. "What was it like growing up where you did? What do you do there? That sort of thing."

"I'm still actually in school," she began. "I'm only sixty two. I'll graduate in a few more years."

He almost fell, tripping on a rock. "You're how old?"

"Oh, you thought I was older? Yeah, everyone is always saying how mature I am for my age."

"No, I mean... you were rebelling against your father. I thought- never mind."

"Why? How old are you?"

"Mentally? Fourteen!"

"But how much of your lifespan is that?"

"My what?"

"You know, how long do you humans generally live?"

Forever, unless the lord of all creation decides he doesn't like you as a species anymore. But he asked Don instead, "Hey Don, how long do modern humans live now?"

"Depends on how rich they are," he answered after a moment's thought. "Or how much magic they know. A wizard can in theory live forever. Someone rich could have a magical object made that stopped their aging. Normal, everyday sort of folks? I guess sixty or so years if they're lucky. Eighty or more if they're not."

"Wait, isn't that backwards?"

"Not really. Do you know what old age does to a person?"

"Not really. My parents were hundreds of years old when they had me. They seemed fine."

"Really? It's certainly different now. If they can't afford magic to cure any ills they can linger on in pain or dementia for years. Hardly see, hardly walk, it's no sort of life, lad. Better to go young, not too young, of course," he hastily clarified. "But finish your work and be done with it. After all, Heaven awaits, right? Life is harsh lad, toil all your life on a farm, pay your taxes every year to a lord, and then be unable to walk for ten years before you die because of the pain your life brought you. Have to be cared for by your kids, pitying looks all the time. I don't look forward to it myself."

So He killed us, didn't actually finish the job or made new people to replace us, and people now degrade somehow as they age? Or they just die way before they should? What did they do to deserve that? Were the "mistakes" we made that got us wiped out mean that these new people had to have these awful limitations? Did we get wiped out through no fault of our own just so He could replace us with these short lived beings that look like us but aren't?

"I can see why." He turned back to Yttrius. "Currently my kind lives sixty to eight years."

"Is that all?" she scoffed. "We live to four hundred!"

That's at least a little more reasonable. If they stay healthy all those years. "Oh. Go on."

"Well, like I said I'm in school. Studying all the standard stuff. Math, history, chemistry, magic, though I'm rubbish at magic."

"What spells do you know? Can you teach me any?"

"I guess. There's no law against it, I don't think. But I just know a handful. Everyone has to learn how to make food and water for themselves. Healing, of course. I can go through the whole list later, it's not that long."

"That would be great. Maybe you two can trade spells somehow?"

"With you interpreting? I don't know..." She shook her head. "Anyway, what I really loved was the more physical stuff. Dancing, swimming, gymnastics, even self-defense. That was my original passion, about twenty years ago, anything physical. My dance teacher said I should try out for the musical my school was putting on, so I did."

"Musical?"

"It's a play with singing."

"What's a play?"

"What's a play? You know, you get up on a stage and act out a story."

"Oh, like a puppet show?" He had seen a few of those in the village, traveling people often put them on for the few children the towns had.

"I guess. Anyway, I got the part and did a couple of musicals. The Lost Child of Minerath is my all-time favorite. Anyway, that's when the agent spotted me and offered me a modeling position for Bedrock magazine!" She looked expectantly over at him.

Do I ask what modeling is or what a magazine is first? "Uh..."

Her face fell. "You don't know what either of those things are, do you?"

“Sorry.”

She shook her head with a grin. “That’s okay. Modeling is... how should I explain this? Let’s say you want to sell some newly designed clothes. Like mine!” She kicked up a heel and skipped forward. “Did I tell you I made these? Design is my current passion.”

“You said.”

“So I did. Anyway, let’s say I wanted to sell them. I need to let people know they’re available right?”

“Right!” He was glad to be back to something he understood.

“But maybe I’m not very attractive. Or I’m a man making woman’s clothes, or I’m too old or whatever. So I hire someone else to wear them and get pictures taken. That shows what they look like so people have an idea what they might look like if *they* wore them. That’s the basics of modeling.”

“Are you?” he asked, before he could stop himself. He colored and wished he could take it back the instant he said it.

“Am I what?”

“No, forget I asked, it was stupid.”

“Really, what?” She grinned at him. “Oh, am I attractive? What do you think?” She started swaying her hips more as she walked.

He looked away, wondering if their kind blushed or it was just his kind that so obviously showed discomfort. *And why the Allfather put that one into us, I’ll never know.*

She laughed and gave him a playful push. “I’m just teasing you. I’m certain we don’t have the same standards of beauty. But yes, actually, I’m considered quite attractive for my kind.”

“Oh. I figured.”

“Did you?” she asked slyly. “But where was I?”

Thank you, a change of subject. “What are pictures?”

“What are- you’re not being serious. Tell me you’re not being serious right now.”

“I’ve really have no idea.”

“Oh, we’ve got to fix this. How to explain though? Okay, if you took light and- what am I saying, I can just show you. I’m such a dummy.” She hit her own head and brought out her padform. Suddenly she was grabbing him around the shoulders and tilting her head up to look at the device. He looked up at it too. “Say minerals!”

“Minerals?”

The device made a click and she held it up to him. “Tada! Oh, that’s getting made my background in a second.”

Lysanias stared at it. On the screen was Yttrius, that much was clear. But that face next to hers- “That’s me?”

“Yup! What, you don’t even know what you look like?”

“Not like this!” *I have got to get rid of this beard. And I look like I’m about to get run over by a horse. Is that shocked expression my face now? Is that permanent?*

“I guess we really do have it good, huh? Wait a second, get the others together, I have to take a picture of all of you. No one would believe me otherwise. Oh, this’ll be so great!”

She ran back down the passageway and made a “get together” motion with her hands.

“What, is she casting a spell or something?” Don asked. “Are we under attack?”

“She wants to take our picture,” he told him.

“Do what?”

“You saw! That thing she carried, it showed us as we were when she pointed it at us.”

“It’s not going to steal our souls or anything, is it?” Everest asked with no small concern.

“What? No, why would it do that?”

“You never can tell,” he grumped.

"Don't just stand there, pose!" Yttrius called, looking at her screen.

"Pose?"

"You know, look heroic or something. Get your swords out!" She mimed holding a sword and striking a pose. "Hiya!"

"She wants us to pose."

"Lad, have I told you the dangers of women yet? First it's posing, then they're making you over or whatever they do. It's downhill from there."

"Let's just do this so we can get going again."

"Very well. What does she want?"

So the three got out their weapons and Yttrius had Lysanias hold his sword high to make it light the area, and suddenly there was a flash and she was skipping back to them. "It came out great. I studied photography for a while too, I've still got it." She showed it to them, and there were the three of them, making fools of themselves with their weapons out, looking like a low budget movie poster.

"Lad, is that... is that me?"

"That's what you look like."

"By the Allfather."

"Didn't realize how short you were?" Everest teased.

"Didn't realize my beard was so fine." He started stroking it. "No wonder certain parties find me irresistible. Look at me, it's like I'm the hero of a story come to life. I should be used for book covers and make money having my portrait painted."

"I have to send this to my friends," squealed Yttrius. She started tapping away at the device, muttering to herself. "Look who I found roaming the tunnels. Can you believe these three? Favor, can you send three copies? Love ya! And send." It made a noise.

"Done. You guys are the best!"

"She says we're the best."

"Oh no, don't tell me my beard's magic is working a spell on her too? Lad, tell her I'm taken."

"Uh..."

Is everyone going to joke at my expense today?

"Come on, we still have pretty far to go," she exclaimed, putting the device away and skipping ahead. "So now you know what photography is. Well, photographs, anyway. Photography is the art of taking the picture. It's harder than you might think. You have to worry about light levels, and focal distance, and aperture size..."

"I'm sure. So you've acted, designed clothes, dance, swim, study math and such, model..."

"Yeah, I'm pretty busy. It was actually modeling that got me interested in photography. I wanted to see what it was like on the other side of the lens."

"Lens?"

"That's what collects the light. The lens on this," she patted her pocket, "is rubbish. But it works well enough. 'The best camera in the world is the one you have when you need to take a picture' as my teacher always said."

"Same could be said for a lot of things. Wards. Spells. Food."

"Got that right. Let's see, I recently learned to drive, my father insisted I be sixty before he would let me learn, I mean can you imagine?"

"No?"

"I didn't think so! And there's hanging out with my friends, dating, another thing my parents just let me do. Not that I'm dating anyone at the moment..." She added suggestively.

What's dating? She said parents, not just father. "Oh, your mother is around? You've never mentioned her."

"Sure, they live together. Most couples with kids do, I don't know how you humans do it. I love both of them to death, but don't tell them I said that. I mean they know, of course they do, but we give each other a hard time all the time and... you

know.”

“But you never know when they’ll be gone, either,” he said sadly, remembering his own parents.

“I guess. I just hope my dad doesn’t go getting himself killed up there. My mom would be furious with him. Anyway, what else about me would you like to know? My measurements maybe? Too bad, that’s a sec-a-ret.” She waggled a finger.

“No, uh, there was something else.” *Measurements? Measurements of what?* “Before the whole picture thing.”

“My being attractive? We covered that, but if you wanted to tell me what you thought was attractive about me...”

“Where were the pictures being put into?”

“Oh, magazines! Yeah, they’re still called that, most are online now. It’s just a collection of stories and pictures in one place, about one subject. Like cooking or keeping your man happy in bed. Rubbish stuff, but seeing my friend’s faces when they saw me staring back at them? It was so great!” She sighed, remembering.

Great, I have no idea what online is. Is every sentence this woman utters just going to bring up more questions? And she seems to have done so much. Of course she has about fifty years on me but still.

“So what can you do? You mentioned some kind of hibernation?”

“It’s sort of a trance we can put ourselves into. We seem dead, but we really aren’t. Our aging stops, we don’t even need to breathe. Supposedly that’s how all these millions of warriors dotted around the world are waiting to be woken up so we can retake the surface.”

“You said that’s just a story, right?”

“Has to be! Let’s say I’ve got a million warriors, right? I’m the leader, and I want to rule the whole world. Do I; one- breed them so I have two million in a short time? Two- Just take over the world with them knowing I might not succeed? Three- Hide them away so everyone in the world gets better magic and technology so my million have an even harder time?” She looked over to him for the answer.

“Probably one or two, right?”

“Exactly. That’s why I think these mythical soldiers are just a myth. It doesn’t make sense they would be out there.”

“Then why do rumors persist that they are?”

She barked a laugh. “Why does our government tell us anything? Only they know.”

“Oh.” *Government? I guess that’s the word they use for their leaders? Our towns were too small to need more than one leader, a larger place might need more people because one person couldn’t be everywhere.* “What other special powers do you have?”

“I wouldn’t call it a power. We can see pretty well in the dark, that’s about it. We’re all magical, does that count?”

Don already said not many humans learn to use magic. How come they all get it? It’s just not fair! “You’re not poisonous or anything, right?”

“Poison?” She looked over at him, confused, and he tapped his teeth. “Oh, no, nothing like that. You don’t have to worry.” She laughed again. “Besides, I wouldn’t bite you until at least the third time. Showing ownership and all that. I wouldn’t presume until then. If that was even what you were into.”

“Third... time?”

Bang There was a puff of smoke and a loud pop and she clapped her hands together. “They came through! Come and look.” Sitting on the floor were three pieces of paper which she picked up. “Here you go!” She handed one to each of the men, who stared down at the photo they had just been handed. It was the picture she had just taken.

“Lad, how in the heck did she just do that?”

“This is that image she showed us. But it’s on paper!” exclaimed Everest. “I have

to know how she did that!"

"They want to know how you did that," Lysanias told her.

"Oh, that's easy. I mailed it to my friends and asked them to make me some copies. They just printed them out and as the image was tagged with my geocoordinates, that and the picture itself was enough to show my location. That let them use the instapost to teleport them to me and poof, there they are. You can keep them, it'll be a nice souvenir of our trip. I'll have to get one with all four of us once the light's better though. My padform flash just doesn't flatter my patterning at all, it's way too harsh. We should totally come up a group name though. Something like Cave Task Force or Interspecies Protection Squad. Anyway, does that answer the question?"

She waited.

"Magic," he told them after trying to sort through all she said in his head. "She used magic."

"Oh, that explains it," Don allowed, not convinced.

"But... But..." Everest tried.

"Don't make me ask her what all her words meant. I think she thinks I'm stupid enough as it is."

"I don't think you're stupid!" she protested.

Oh, right, everyone can understand me. I forgot because these guys can't understand her, so for some bizarre reason I believed she couldn't understand me when I spoke to them. I really am stupid. "You don't?"

"It's not your fault you didn't get born an annunaki. Why would being a different race make you stupid? That would be stupid."

"Thanks."

"And the surface goes through so many changes, that's not your fault either. So of course you're not as advanced as us. So don't ever think you're stupid, okay?"

"Okay." He felt a little better.

"Unattractive, maybe, but not stupid," she obviously joked.

And he felt worse again.

All the Feels

When: Nearly three days later

Where: Just outside the cave leading to the surface

The group had pressed on in the later hours of the third day because Don said he felt air currents. With the possibility of finally leaving the caves and seeing what the situation was on the surface, the group agreed to push on for a few hours after they would normally stop. There was little conversation, as Lysanias had told Yttrius about his past and she had even started learning a bit of Trade. This, he found out, was the name given to the language humans spoke now because most contact between other races and humans was trade related. Given humans were plentiful on the surface and everybody needed to eat, it was the best second language to learn because even an avian meeting a unicorn would probably have that in common. Each would have been in contact with humans and thus learned some Trade.

But language was the furthest thing from Yttrius' mind as she stared in wonder at the night sky that stretched out before her. There were only some thin clouds to obstruct the view, and while the chaos moon was rising at one horizon, the other was just a thin crescent. This left the stars in sharp relief, with no light pollution to speak of, meaning the view was quite spectacular.

"These are stars?" she breathed, slowly spinning in a circle to take in as much of the horizon as she could. Naturally the mountain cave they had just emerged from meant that her vision was at least partly obstructed, but the group breathed in the crisp night air and watched Yttrius be enchanted by the sight. To make up for the obstructed view behind her they were quite far up the mountain meaning there were no trees in the way. Stars sparkled above a carpet of darkness as far as the eye could see. "This was so worth the trip. I've never seen anything like this. Lysanias, I mean, thank you so much for allowing me to come."

"Sure. I'm glad you like it."

"I really do." She went back to staring at the sky and he joined her, seeing the sky with new eyes. They were close, their shoulders almost touching, and he wished he could take her hand, be more connected to her in this moment. But his own uncertainty held him back, he wasn't sure how she would react.

At least the sky hasn't changed, apart from the new moon over there. Not that I can tell, anyway. He felt tired from the extra hours of travel but excited to share this moment with her. He looked over to see her face again, shining in the starlight. *I can at least take in the sight of-*

She was holding up her padform. "My friends are going to be so jealous!" she told him. The stars rolled by as she panned the horizon, showing the moons and clouds. The video saved she went to send it along, tapping the screen excitedly.

Ah. And the moment is gone.

The next morning he found himself being shaken awake, Yttrius excitedly shouting something. "Come on, come on, get up! You have to see this!"

"What? Is the meadow on fire?" he asked sleepily.

"Fire? No, the sun is coming up."

And? He squinted against the light and Yttrius was dancing from one foot to another excitedly.

"It's a sunrise, Lysanias. My first sunrise! Look at it over there, can you even imagine the power there? Come on, get up, look at it with me, pleeeeeease?"

He sleepily pushed himself to a sitting location and rubbed his eyes. Finally getting them open he looked around.

It's sunrise all right. Meaning- way too early to be up. He looked over from the

mouth of the cave and saw what she was pointing at. There were sparse clouds in the sky but the shafts of light issuing from the golden ball rising in the east touched every one of them. Below, green fields waved in the early morning breeze, and the banished night left a blue sky quite different than Lysanias had remembered. *I suppose the world has been through a lot, but you think the color of the sky would have remained the same. Or is that asking too much?*

"Isn't it wonderful?" Yttrius asked, entranced. "Feel that? Wind! I've never felt wind before. And sunlight hitting me, it's so great! Look at the... plants? The plants down below, they're all swirling and bending like a million dancers. I have to record this!"

How about that? She may have magical weapons and can summon up paper with our images on them on a whim, but even I've seen the sun. Was their exile under the ground really worth it?

"What's she going on about?" Don asked roughly, also looking around in disgust at how early he was being awoken. Yttrius was filming again, narrating what she was seeing for the people back home.

"Sunrise." *Wait, if her friends see this and they tell their friends and so on and so on, will we have started the invasion of the surface not by force of arms, but young people seeking new experiences?*

"Is that all? I don't believe it." He fell back against his pack that served as a pillow. "I don't bloody believe it."

With no chance of getting back to sleep at this point the group got busy breaking camp and heading to the town they saw in the distance. It wasn't far, the elves didn't like being out in the open after being underground for so long, so their exit was fairly near. As they got closer though Everest noticed something.

"What in the world is that?" he asked, pointing. "It can't be a bird, it's too big and it's not going anywhere."

The others looked up and indeed, above the town they could see something floating there. It looked like an egg floating in the sky, and had the group stumped.

"Certainly nothing I've ever seen? Don? Yttrius? Any clues?"

"May as well just get closer and see for ourselves," Don answered. "Doesn't seem like a dragon circling the town, it's too stationary. I can't imagine what it could be."

"You guys have some magic up here, right? Could be anything, really." Yttrius suggested.

"I guess. Better go see." *But if she doesn't recognize it, that's somewhat of a relief. That may mean this town has been spared. That begs the question, where did the invading force go if not straight for this town?*

An hour later the group made it into the outskirts, and it was instantly clear this was a much larger settlement than the previous elven farm had been. People were everywhere going about their business, and Yttrius was going back and forth over exclaiming how amazing things were (like horses and the smell of freshly baked bread) to how her city was superior in every way (with real roads and buildings hundreds of stories tall). She was talking a mile a minute, trying to get Don to tell her the names of things in Trade but he was looking for something or someone and didn't understand what she was asking for. Lysanias wasn't paying attention because he was focused on something quite different.

The kids.

They were everywhere, in all ages. Kids in his world were all the same age. This was a consequence of those wanting to have kids waiting until several couples wanted to have kids so they could all grow up together. Knowing they would live basically forever there was no rush to have a child, and various ways to make sure it only happened when they wanted it to exist. So they waited. And when a few people in the

village were ready, a batch of new people came into the world and grew up together. This meant they would always have someone their own age to grow up with, and figure out growing up together. They would have someone to talk to their own age, someone that understood what they were going through. Because they were going through it themselves. But here, it seemed, things were a little bit more fluid. Here everyone did their own thing and it was a big, confusing, glorious mess.

Laughing, playing, doing chores, crowding around the newcomers and asking to see their swords- Kids were everywhere. Tall, short, girls, boys, in all manner of dress and temperament. Red hair, black, golden, brown, and skin tones just as diverse. But where there were kids there were *parents*. Carrying babies, calling for youngsters, walking with teens. And suddenly the full weight of what had happened came crashing down on Lysanias.

I should be one of those kids. Playing and laughing with my friends. Hearing my mother's voice calling me to wash up for dinner. Throwing a ball around with my father afterwards. Trying to get out of studying wards, or sneaking out to swim on hot nights I couldn't sleep. But no, now I'm here. In this stupid body that's thousands of years old that I'll probably never get used to. My family gone. My friends gone. My entire world-gone. And why? For what reason was I punished? And after all this time what has been accomplished? These houses look no better than the ones we made. What was the point of it all? Are these people so much better than us that we had to be destroyed to the last person to make way for them?

"Hey mister, are you okay?"

Lysanias looked down and saw a small boy looking up at him. He realized his face was wet, that he had been silently crying. Standing there in the street, Lysanias had wept for all he had lost. "I'm fine," he managed, turning from the city and head down, quickly walking back out the way he came.

"Are you all right lad?" Don asked, noticing his charge retreating back the way they had come.

"Did we just screw up?" Everest asked, being a bit more sensitive.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Yttirus, but of course the two didn't understand and simply went after their young friend. She curiously followed, thinking furiously if it could have been something she said or had done to have made her strange, new friend act this way. For what did a creature like her, with every comfort ever created at her fingertips, know of loss? She could see he was upset, *felt it* in a way she could never explain to her friends because she always knew when they were feeling particularly sad or happy too. But this? What had she missed to have caused this reaction?

Or maybe, she thought, it wasn't any one thing, but actually everything all at once.

They found him leaning against a tree, sobbing and shaking.

"Ach, I'm sorry lad, we handled that badly. Should have..." But there was nothing Don or Everest could have said, could have done to prepare their young friend for the reminder of what he had lost. For the grief, held back until now because a dark cave, or a giant worm, or a strange reptile girl are very different situations than this bustling village scene. Now it sought release, as a boy out of time cried for the parents that he would never see again. For all those, even those he never knew, that had lost their lives to the rain sent by their creator.

"I'm fine now," he said, some time later. The others were sitting nearby, waiting for him to compose himself. "I'm sorry about that."

"Our fault, I should have realized," Everest told him.

"Hit you pretty hard, huh?" asked Yttirus, not insensitive to what she finally realized was going on. "You told me, you know, about your past but I didn't really get it. Not until just now. I really am sorry, for what happened to you."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I can see that you're in pain, but how do I help you? I can't. I can't even share it." She was clasping her hands and wringing them, unable to be still with her friend in distress. "My parents are alive. My home is waiting for me. What tragedy in my entire existence, many times longer than yours, even compares?" Her hands flew over her mouth. "Shoot, I'm probably messing up just saying that." She fell silent, dropping her eyes.

"Do you want to wait here?" Don asked. "Obviously the town is not under attack, we can warn them, come back and get you, and talk about our next move then. Maybe they went to a different town that's nearby? You don't have to go back, not and face all that. Not until you're ready."

He shook his head. "I have to face this sooner or later. Have to make something of the life my parents saved. Maybe my being saved happened for a reason. I don't have faith in the Allfather, He was the one who destroyed my life. But that little fox girl sent you both into tunnels where you would find me and wake me up. Maybe I'll have faith in her."

"Better than a spider demon, I guess," Everest agreed. He gave a half smile and dried his eyes. "Let's go."

The group got back into the town again, this time with a few more suspicious looks given they had come and gone and come back again. But everyone knew dwarves were okay, they were dwarves! Another human occasioned no comment, and even gnomads were not unknown in these parts. As the lizard girl was with them and not attacking anything or acting hostile she was largely ignored. At least by older people. Kids were running up to her, obviously daring each other to touch her and get away. She chuckled at this, now far subdued from her earlier exuberance.

Don made a beeline for a bored looking man sitting in a cart that was being unloaded in front of a general store.

"Excuse me," he called up.

"What can I do for you?"

"Looking to speak to someone in charge around here."

"In charge of the street?" The man looked up and down the road in confusion. "Or do you mean my cart?"

"Uh, the town, actually."

"Oh! You want the mayor! Office is three streets down that way, turn right, up two streets and make a left, third house on the right."

Don repeated it back to him and thanked him. "Let's go," he told the others.

Walking through the place Lysanias was reminded of home and that this was a whole new world at the same time. The houses had a different design, and used somewhat different materials. Windmills seemed fairly common, and each house had an odd metal protrusion from the roof that was quite large around. He heard the banging of a blacksmith in the distance, and of course laundry was hanging everywhere.

"It's so primitive," Yttrius couldn't help exclaiming, filming everything of course. "And I still can't tell what that floating thing is."

Having reached the mayor's office the group went inside to find a person operating a printing press. A bell hung over the door jingled.

"Can I help you?" the man asked, looking up from his work.

"Are you the mayor?" Don asked uncertainly.

"Me? No. I just broke in to make some copies of this notice for the community dance next week." He held up a freshly printed flyer, and Lysanias saw a stack of identical copies of the notice stacked nearby. The text was crisp and black, making him curious how it worked. The man looked at their confused faces. "I'm just kidding. I'm the mayor's assistant, Tom Harley. I work here, honest. Nobody would get ink all over themselves unless they had to." He held up an ink stained hand. "You need to see the

mayor?"

"If he's free."

"Said something about a horse. I think he headed to the outskirts of town to talk to some farmers. That way," he pointed. "Or you can wait here. He shouldn't be long."

"We'll go see him, it could be urgent," Don replied. "Thanks."

"Sure thing."

They went in the direction the man pointed and eventually heard the sounds of two men arguing, which they headed towards. Three men were standing in front of a fence, one portly and better dressed, the other two younger but in rougher clothes. They stopped shouting as the group approached. Yttirus squealed in delight, easily vaulted the rickety wooden fence and went to go check out the baby horse that was wandering around inside. It came over to nuzzle her.

"Hey!" both men said, then glowered at the other.

"Please excuse her," Lysanias quickly said. "She doesn't know our customs."

"That's no excuse!" said the one.

"She better not hurt that foal!" said the other. "MY foal."

"Not yours yet, Anchorage. That's for the mayor to decide."

"Which I will," assured the mayor dryly, "if you two can stop shouting at each other for one minute and let me think."

"Isn't it just the most adorable thing?" Yttirus cooed, the horse sniffing her hand. She patted it on the head and ran her fingers through the mane. "It's so soft!"

He couldn't help but smile, the girls he had grown up with had loved horses too.

"You fellows want something?" asked the mayor. "Maybe a horse?"

"Now don't you go giving them my horse!" protested the one.

"Peace, Ichabod. I'm not giving them the horse. Can you fellows wait a moment, I can only deal with one crisis at a time."

"What's the trouble?" asked Everest, who had a pretty good idea.

"Couple of months ago, Anchorage's horse got free of his barn and paid a visit to a mare here on the Ichabod farm. This little cutie is the result."

"Both men claim to own the foal?"

"Hey, you're good at this. Maybe you've got a fair solution for me too?"

"Personal combat," put in Don.

"Don't tempt me," answered the mayor, glowering at the two men.

Lysanias chuckled, imagining them with flaming swords in their hands.

"How about you? What's your solution?" the mayor asked, looking at him.

"What? Me? Oh, uh, I don't know. Have the horse breed again and that way both of them get a foal?"

"Still bad will in the meantime. What were you going to say, sir?"

"If this was an accident they shouldn't profit unduly. I'd say auction the horse off and they each get half the proceeds. Minus the taxes and various fees paid to the village for the auction, of course."

"Ah!" the mayor's eyes lit up at the prospect of more tax revenue. "Now that does seem fair. You're both not willing to budge on this, neither of you gets it. Once it's weaned we'll hold an auction. Ichabod, you'll keep the foal safe until then, as the mother is here. Anchorage, you'll be responsible for half any fees relating to the foal." He turned away before either man could protest. "Now with that out of the way, what can I help you guys out with?"

"We came to warn you about a small invasion force of people like her that recently came out of a cave."

"Oh, them," he said, looking serious. "I'm afraid you're a little late."

Showing Their Concern

Where: Talking to the mayor

When: Just after "you're too late."

When Lysanias had walked through the town he had not seen burned houses. He had not smelled the flesh of his fellow man, burning in the street. He had not heard the cries of orphans bemoaning the awful fate that had taken their parents away. He saw life going on as usual. This meant only one thing: Somehow, this quaint little village nestled at the base of the nearby mountain *had totally slaughtered the invading force with little trouble*. With no damage to the town, and they had somehow gotten rid of all the bodies too, because the invader's corpses were not rotting in the streets either.

"They're all dead?" he blurted, unable to believe his ears.

"Who is?" asked the mayor.

"Wait, they're all dead?" wailed Yttrius, spinning and advancing back to the edge of the fence. "Even my father?" She grabbed the mayor by his shirt collar. "What did you do to them?"

"What's she saying?" The mayor's eyes were wide, he could feel her claws and saw those teeth of hers.

"She's attacking the mayor!" shouted Ichabod. "Someone get help!"

"She's not attacking him!"

"Help, help, the mayor is under attack!"

"Why did you kill them all?"

"They defeated that whole force?" Don asked, looking at these people with new respect.

"Be quiet and let me talk to the man. Yttrius, let him go!"

"Murderers! I won't let them get away with this!" She started shaking the mayor back and forth. "Murderers! My father never hurt anyone!"

"Tell this person we didn't kill anybody!" shouted the mayor, trying to get away from Yttrius.

Of course, everyone was shouting all this at once so naturally Lysanias misheard this statement. "You killed everybody?"

"They really killed everybody?"

"Help!"

"This man killed them all himself?"

"Please let me get the whole story!"

"These creatures couldn't have taken our army."

"What's she saying, lad? Do we need to separate them?" Don put his hand on his sword.

"I knew she would be trouble!" Everest added, quite unhelpfully. "Typical."

"Please, get off him!" Lysanias was pulling at Yttrius, and the two farmers jumped in to help him. She was somewhat incoherent at this point, luckily too worked up to remember any magic or even to pull out her beam weapon. She wanted to crush his vermin with her own claws. That, and she hadn't had the beam gun for very long, having been given it when she started towards the surface. It wasn't part of her routine yet, in other words, to just whip it out.

"We didn't kill anybody!" insisted the mayor.

"He says they didn't kill them!"

"I'll kill him- what?" She stopped. "So are they dead or aren't they?"

"Are they dead or not?"

"They aren't, I'm trying to tell you."

"He says they aren't."

"But you said before that he said they were all dead."

"He said it was too late, I didn't know what he meant and I was trying to get clarification."

"Well why didn't you say so?" She relaxed her grip. It was not lost on any of them that he and two grown men had not been able to pull her away from him. On one hand they were on the other side of the fence, but still. *Just how strong is she? And I didn't say so because you immediately started trying to choke the guy to death.*

"My goodness!" The mayor was breathing heavily. "That gave me quite a fright. What was she screaming anyway? Why did you say we had killed people?"

"You said it was too late!"

"Your *warning* came too late, you idiot. Your *warning*. We saw them wandering around out there days ago thanks to our spotter balloon. We already knew about it. So if you were looking for some kind of reward for bringing us the news, you were too late. That's all I meant. Goodness!"

"What's he saying? Are they dead or not?"

He held up a hand to her. "Have they died in the meantime?"

"Not that I know of. Do I look like I'm in the spotter balloon?"

"He says they're still fine. We came too late to give them the warning, something about a spotter balloon."

"What's that?"

"She wants to know what that is."

"If she's done *attacking* me- say... How come you keep translating? She must understand what I'm saying because I understand what you're saying and we're speaking the same language."

Lysanias looked up at the sky. *Are You laughing at me right now? Are You? Is this funny to You? All these languages, did you do this on purpose just to annoy everyone?* "It's a long story. Please, her father is part of that group so she wants to know what's going on with them. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding? She almost killed me!"

"An exaggeration, I'm sure," Don suggested.

"It felt like it. Am I bleeding? I think I'm bleeding?" He was touching his neck and looking at his fingers.

"You'll be fine, it's just some pinpricks."

"She's not poisonous or anything, is she? Why does she have claws in the first place? She some kind of mutant, is that why she looks like that? Never seen anyone look like that. We don't like mutants around here."

"She said she wasn't. And I don't know, why shouldn't she have claws? What's a mutant?"

"What's a mutant? You been sleeping under a rock since the chaos moon showed up?"

"Actually-"

"In any case, for your sake I hope you're right. Attacking me in broad daylight. I should have her arrested, but it really was all your-" He caught sight of her staring daggers at him. "My goodness, come with me and she can see for herself."

"He says he can show us."

She vaulted the fence again. "Tell him to be quick about it."

"She says thank you, that would be wonderful."

"I did not!"

"Oh, yes you did."

"This way." He started off, shaking his head and muttering to himself about murderous weirdos that looked like lizard woman and the dangers of jumping to conclusions. Then something about a mat? He further cursed out people wandering into town, clearly ignorant hicks from the Allfather knew where, and it sort of went downhill from there. He did this in Trollish, figuring nobody would understand *that* language but of course Lysanias did.

The main problem was it was somewhat deserved, so he could hardly refute it. And he didn't want to embarrass the man by letting on he knew what he was saying. So he simply trailed along behind, cheeks growing redder.

Finally the group came to the center of town where four rope ladders hung suspended in the air. Looking up and up Lysanias saw the strange "floating egg" from before, making no sound but just lazily bobbing in the wind.

"This," the mayor said with no small pride, "is our spotter balloon."

"How does it work?" asked Everest, clearly fascinated. "Magic?"

"Only initially. See, we were going to build some guard towers but that would have required four of them at least. One at every corner of the town. But then our doctor gave us a better idea. If we could heat the air and trap it, it would rise and a person could float over the town. In this way we would only need one person on watch duty, not four."

"Hot air?"

"That's the genius of it. We only needed one spell. Of course, the town wizard still charged us a boatload for it, but what can you do?"

"What sort of spell?" asked Don.

"He made the barrel of oil we set on fire never exhaust the oil. Of course that means the balloon is sort of stuck up there. Takes too long to build up the hot air if we let it out to land. Hence the ladders, which also serve as the anchors." He indicated where the four rope ladders went into the ground, tied with thick knots to iron rings pounded into pieces of rock that were partly buried. These had metal spikes driven into them, so the town *really* didn't want to lose their balloon to a storm or anything. It was there to stay unless the ropes frayed.

"So a thing made only of, what, burlap or something?"

"Some kind of cloth. I don't know the doctor helped prepare it."

"A cloth in an egg shape with a hole open at the bottom for the fire and that looks like a big basket hung on the bottom of it? That makes this balloon?"

"That's right."

"Just that and you have a *flying* outpost? What a fantastic thing!"

"Only one in the world, that I know of. Of course, this was ages ago and many travelers come through here. So the idea may have spread. We couldn't exactly hide it, you know?"

"What's he saying?" Yttrius asked.

"He's explaining how the thing stays up there. Magic fire filling a bag with hot air."

"Oh, sure, hot air rises. I could have told you that."

"Their doctor told them."

"Doctor? Seems an odd thing for a medical professional to mention."

"I wouldn't know."

"Anyway, are you all satisfied?" asked the mayor. "I have to get back to work."

"This is serious you know," Don insisted. "That force we came to warn you about took over an elf village on the way here. According to this girl it wants to take over the whole surface."

"That tiny group?"

"Yes."

"Who went in the opposite direction of us?"

"Well, yes."

"And who are now at least a day's march away for a force that large, giving us plenty of time to see them and evacuate the city?"

"And let them take it over without a fight?" He seemed stunned.

"I meant the woman and children."

"That's all right then. But yes, them. They're all wizards."

“And she told you this?”

“That’s right.”

“And you trust her?”

“Uh...”

“I see. Well, if it makes you feel any better consider the village warned. If you want to go up and see what they’re doing for yourselves, be my guest. I’m going back to work. Oh, and welcome to Farpoint. Enjoy your stay.” He turned and walked away.

“He is totally not taking this seriously at all,” Don suggested. The others agreed.

“What did he say?”

“That the mayor isn’t taking this threat seriously.”

“Then he’s an idiot.”

“From our point of view, maybe. But they did go off in another direction, so this ‘leader’ of yours may have some other plan. Maybe they’re always prepared for this sort of thing and don’t need any more time? I don’t know, you don’t get to be mayor by being careless with the lives of your people, right? He invited us to climb up to the balloon and have a look for ourselves if we were so concerned.”

“He did?”

“Yes.”

“This balloon? Way up there?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.” She jumped up, grabbed onto the rope that made up the nearest ladder and started climbing.

“What’s she doing lad? Is she nuts? You fall from that height and it’s all over for you.”

“She wants to see what they’re doing.”

“She’s welcome to it. I’m not going up there.”

He sighed. “But I think I have to. If I don’t, there’s going to be one very surprised and possibly terrified person at the top when she makes it.”

“It was nice knowing you, lad.”

“Very funny.” He looked up at the tiny balloon overhead and shook his own head. *I’m being punished, that’s the only explanation.* He began to climb.

There was a fair amount of wind as he worked his way up to the balloon on the narrow rope ladder, but Yttrius called encouragement to him once she realized he was following her. The rope swayed and twisted which didn’t seem to bother her much, but did bother him a fair amount. *Of course, she has claws so she can hang on a bit better, can’t she?* He finally reached the top and a startled young man in the basket helped them over the side.

“Hello?” he said, unsure why these two were up here. He was in a sort of uniform, at least it looked a little more formal than what others had been wearing in the street. It was still quite plain, colored dye or more than a few buttons being expensive. He was clean shaven, maybe mid twenties, and his hair was every which way due to the wind.

Yttrius was making a hand motion for Lysanias to do the talking, but he was trying to catch his breath and not look over the edge. He was also stalling for time, trying to figure out what to say to this man, how to broach the subject. He didn’t know the guy, how do you start that conversation? Just blurt it out? That didn’t seem right.

“Can I help you?” the man asked, looking between them.

“One second,” he managed. “You do that every day?”

“Oh, it’s not so bad. Being up here is great though, isn’t it? Look at that view. I wish I could just jump from here and zoom over the houses like in a dream.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” he lied. A moment later and he was recovered enough to stand, gripping the edge of the basket tightly.

“Tell him what we want! I mean the view is pretty but we have a job to do here.”

“What language is that?”

“Annunaki, I guess? I only realized they had names a few days ago, so I never asked.” The man looked as if he didn’t quite believe this. “Anyway, can you point out the force that come out of the nearby cave a few days ago? Pretty easy to see, it would be about a hundred people?”

“Oh sure, they’re camped over by lover’s rock.”

“Lover’s rock?”

“Over there.” He pointed, and both looked over in that direction. “Here.” Lysanias noticed he had a tube of some kind in his hand, and he was offering it to him. *What am I supposed to do with that?*

But Yttrius grabbed it up and stuck it to her eye, looking over there.

“You’re welcome,” the man grumbled. “Anyway, lover’s rock is some weird piece of stone that’s been stuck in the ground since before the town got founded. It’s a couple of hours ride from here, but the local legend says that if you confess your love to someone while on the rock, it’ll be returned.”

“Confess? To anyone?”

“No, to the person you love. Why would you confess to anyone else?” He looked at Lysanias like he was stupid. “I suppose the rock could *make* someone love you, if it was magic. But I don’t think it is...”

“So you have to drag someone on the road for hours, to a place they know you’re going to confess at?”

“I guess.”

“Anyone who wouldn’t return their feelings would just stop them and go back. So of course the rock seems to work. The people that go there are already in love. The rock is just the excuse to tell them properly, it isn’t needed.”

“I didn’t say it was a *good* local legend. We have another about a haunted mansion. I think it’s that one there.” He pointed and Lysanias started to look but there was a wind that shook the balloon and he gripped the edge and closed his eyes. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Suit yourself.”

“They’re out there, all right,” Yttrius said, handing him the tube. “But what could they be doing?”

“I just look through this?” He took it and looked it over. This of course meant that he had to take one hand off the edge of the basket, so he was moving very carefully.

“Yeah, it’s so primitive. No greater magnification at all. Useless.”

“Okay?” *What’s magnification?* He put his eye to it and was surprised to see the landscape jump up towards him. The unexpected nature of the tube and the wind and his own nervousness and having longer fingers than he expected caused it to fly out of his hand and tumble to the ground far below.

“Ow!” came from below. “What in the bloody heck are you doing up there?” came the faint voice of Don.

“Nice one,” praised Yttrius sarcastically. “What do you for your next trick? Accidentally knock into the fire barrel and plunge us all to our deaths?” She held a finger up and there was the barrel and fire, very inefficiently filling the bag with hot air. But as it would continue to do so until the end of time (unless otherwise disturbed) it was a very good use of a single spell.

“Do you know how much that cost?” the man demanded, looking at him now instead of over the edge of the balloon. “More than my salary for the year, that’s what. What am I going to tell the mayor?”

“I’ll go get it,” he sighed.

“You think it survived that?”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll be right back.” Carefully swinging his leg over he caught the rope ladder and started down, trying not to think about what would happen to him if he fell. Finally he reached the bottom and looked down at Don, who was glaring up at him.

"You trying to get rid of me?"

"No."

"Funny way of showing it. You two go up there and suddenly some weird thing bangs me in the head."

"It was just a tube, it couldn't have been that heavy. Can you fix it? It slipped out of my hand and fell, that's all."

"Oh, is that your story?"

"It's what happened."

"Very well, let me find the pieces of it. I'm fine, by the way. Thanks for offering to heal my lump. You know, the one on my head?"

"You're so hard headed I'm surprised you noticed," Everest remarked.

"Ha ha, very funny. Help me look."

With the newly repaired tube safely tucked into his pants Lysanias began the climb again. Back in the basket he handed it over and the man examined it. Finally he looked through it and was satisfied. "I guess it's fine," he allowed. "But I'm not letting you have it again. It wouldn't survive that fall a second time." He gripped it tightly.

It didn't the first time, but whatever. "That's fine. What did you see, Yttrius?"

"They are out there, some distance away. They're setting up camp and doing a bunch of magic. I could see the flashes of light from here. Couldn't tell the types of spells, but it's pretty busy."

"This guy said something about a rock?"

"The camp is surrounding something that's sticking out of the ground. Could be a rock, hard to tell."

"Have you seen enough? Can we discuss this on the ground again?"

"Why? You afraid of heights?"

"Never had the opportunity to be, but I'm considering taking it up. One thing I do know; I'm afraid of hitting the ground if I start from here. Is that the same thing?"

"Nearly, I think. Okay." She lightly and nimbly got over the side and started climbing down. She made it look easy.

"Not so much as a by your leave then?" asked the man. "I'm glad I could help."

"Look, I'm sorry about her. She doesn't speak Trade, so it would be pointless to say anything."

"I guess."

"But I want to thank you. Please keep an eye on that group. They took over an elf farming group before they came here, and took some elves back to their territory. We rescued them, but they meant business. If they start to approach, warn everyone immediately."

"I really don't need you to tell me how to do my job."

"Of course, I just wanted to... I just... I'm sorry. I'll just go."

"Please do."

Now back on the ground he told the others what Yttrius had told him, and what the man had told them about the rock.

"The town is in no immediate danger then?"

"I don't think so. We would get at least a few hours warning."

"If he's not sleeping up there," cautioned Everest.

"How could anyone- the point is, now what?"

"That's easy lad. I'm starving and I desperately need something stronger to drink than the water I've had to make do with these last few weeks. I'm going to the nearest inn or tavern and getting some lunch. We can discuss our next move after that."

He and Everest moved off back the way they had come to get to the balloon.

"Where are they going?" asked Yttrius, taking a few quick steps as Lysanias went after them to catch up.

“Just come on.”

She trailed along behind him.

Some Dangers are Quite Mundane

When: Half an hour later

Where: Nearest tavern

Don sighed contentedly. He had just finished a thick steak, potato dripping with butter, two mugs of ale, and part of a chicken that several bites into Yttrius had refused. She said it tasted fine, much better than anything she had tasted created by magic, but couldn't keep eating it. Said she started to feel funny. Don had shrugged, taken the plate, and made sure the meal he had paid for didn't go to waste.

Yttrius, however, was looking worse and worse.

"She says she doesn't feel well," Lysanias reported.

"How can chicken disagree with her?" asked Don. "It's like the blandest thing there is. It's the thing everything else tastes like!"

"I don't know, but she says she feels strange."

"You don't think it was poisoned, do you?" asked Everest, who had eaten some of it himself.

"Probably just a bit of vegetable that doesn't agree with her," Don replied. "I had more of her meal than she did. If she was poisoned after a few bites, I should be on the floor."

"You know dwarven constitution is much better than most," he argued.

"Can't say no to that statement. Let's get her outside, maybe she just needs some fresh air."

The group got her up, but she was looking dazed and not herself at all. Outside she slumped against the side of the building.

"What do we do?" Lysanias asked, concerned. "Is there something you need?"

She was too out of it to answer.

"Just a second, lad." Don went back in and returned a moment later. "This way."

The group half dragged, half carried the unresponsive annunaki, Lysanias following Don's directions. They came to a large building and he pushed the door open and helped drag her inside.

He's just barging in? Where is he taking us?

"Oh my!" he heard from within. Looking around he saw a large room set with chairs along each wall, all which were currently empty. At the corners grew some pretty plants in pots of dirt, and the walls were covered in paintings of flowers and waterfalls and small, cute, animals. Straight across the way was a desk, and behind that sat an older woman in a white smock. "Bring her in here, I'll get the doctor at once."

Oh. That's where.

The group dragged her past the desk and into a small room, where they tipped her into the bed that was there. She sat with a thud and lay down, mumbling incoherently. A moment later a metal man walked into the room, and Lysanias went to grab his sword.

"Easy lad, I was told to expect this!" Don said, shoving the sword back in the scabbard with a blow to the pommel. "This is the doctor."

"Huh?" He looked the metal man over, who was not wearing any clothes. The limbs were about as thick as a person's, but sleek and white. The head was smooth and bulbous, and just as with the padform he had seen earlier an image of a smiling face was being shown on it. It was highly stylized to just show a colored circle with a pair of eyes and a mouth carved out.

"My apologies for startling you," said the figure. As he did, a bar of light went up and down on the face. "I know my appearance can be a bit unsettling for those that have not seen a remnant before. I take it this is my patient? Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

Lysanias shook off his stupor, he would deal with that later. Yttrius needed him

now. "Yes, she just collapsed after eating a bit of lunch. Can you tell what's wrong?"

"Oh dear."

That doesn't sound good.

The doctor bent over her, placing a hand on her head. "This is a species I've never encountered before. As such I have no reference for her normal physiology. This will make diagnostics quite difficult. Tell me, have you touched her?"

"What?" He reddened.

The odd face swiveled to look at him. "Have you felt her body heat? I need to know if her current temperature is higher or lower than normal."

"Oh. I guess? Let me see." The doctor stepped back and let him forward, and he touched her leg trying to remember how warm she had felt. Was she hotter? They had been in that hole for a while talking.

"Odd place to check, the traditional site is the forehead."

"I haven't touched her forehead," he complained. "I've only touched her legs."

"It's a long story," Don told him.

"I suppose it must be."

"She maybe feels a little warmer? I'm no expert."

"Pity. With your permission I will take a blood sample. We can see that she remains comfortable here and when an hour has elapsed, I will take another. If there are significant changes a course of treatment will, I hope, present itself."

"Do whatever you have to!"

"Very well." The doctor stepped forward and from a finger a needle extended, which he pushed into her arm for a moment. "I have the sample, and am analyzing it for infection now."

For what? "Is there anything you can do in the meantime?"

"I hesitate to do anything that might make her condition worse. I have been experimenting with various method of penicillin production but without knowing how her species would react to such treatments I do not wish to rush into anything. The blood work analysis should only take a few moments. Do you believe she will die in the meantime?"

Lysanias looked down at her. He could feel her life energy, it was still strong. He shook his head. "Her life energy is not fading," he announced. "I guess I can tell you if it starts to."

"You can sense that? Extraordinary. That would be of singular importance to one in a medical capacity, such as myself. Still, what is, is, and what is not, is not. I will return once the diagnostic is complete." The doctor turned and went to attend to his other patients.

"What is that?" Lysanias asked, feeling helpless. He sat down in a nearby chair and took Yttrius' hand. Did it feel hot? Now that he thought about it, they had done that bet sealing with their hands, but that had been brief. Far too brief.

"A remnant, and a fairly sophisticated one if I don't miss my guess," Everest told him. "Probably been around a long time."

"But what is it?"

"Oh. An artificial person. They were made by the millions before the moon. Only a handful survived, but some factories still churn them out today. Can't really stop, as that is what they were created to do, and nobody knows enough now to tell them otherwise."

"Artificial person? Were there not enough real ones?"

He laughed. "It was basically another kind of enslavement. One people could tolerate because they were 'just machines.' The lengths people will go to delude themselves." He shook his head sadly.

"This one seems to have been a medical unit of some kind," Don observed. "Probably why it lasted. Any sort of crisis and it would have been with the most vulnerable. The sick and dying. So naturally it would be the most protected by those not sick and dying."

"Explains the balloon, and how the doctor had the idea. It probably had lots of scientific knowledge as well as medical put into it. So of course it would know how to make a hot air balloon. Wonder if it's saved any books..."

"You and your books, we've only been here half a day."

"A quarter of a day too long to be without a book," he quipped. "Actually I think I saw some back in that first room. I'll wait there, we don't all need to be crowded in here."

"Yeah, I'll come with you. Just give a shout if something changes, okay lad?"

"I will."

Both left, leaving Lysanias looking down at the prone form of Yttirus. Her stomach grumbled, and she cried out a little, but then went still again. "How can I help you?" he asked pitifully. "I don't know what to do."

But he again got no answer from her. Moments later the doctor returned. His projected face was no longer smiling, but it was not frowning either. It was simply a line. "The number of microbes is not excessive," he reported. "However, that itself may be a warning sign for her species. Perhaps she is losing certain vital microorganisms as other, more invasive ones, take their place. We will have a better sense when I take the second sample, forty seven minutes and sixteen seconds from... mark. In the meantime, I have a moment, please describe the incident that led up to this collapse."

I can't follow half what this artificial man is saying. It's like talking to Yttirus. What's the point of understanding all languages if you don't understand the words of the language any better than if you didn't understand all languages? Lysanias did, saying she had been fine one minute, went to eat lunch, and only finished a portion before complaining of pain and disorientation.

"Was the rest of the portion consumed? Could a sample of it be provided?"

Perhaps a poison-

He shook his head. "Don ate the rest of it. And he's fine."

"And Don is?"

"The dwarf."

"Ah, dwarven constitution is known to me. I shall nevertheless ask for a blood sample from him, perhaps some substance will reveal itself. She has eaten this particular meal before?"

"No. We always ate each other's food, which we made with magic on the way here. She wanted to try what our magic made, and we tried what her magic made. None of us got sick because of it."

"Curious. Perhaps some kind of allergy to a seasoning that was applied to the meal?"

"What's an allergy?" *At least I know what a seasoning is. It's another word for spice.*

"An overreaction of the body's systems to a foreign substance." He caught Lysanias' blank look. "Your body is continuously fighting off things you breathe in, come in with your food, or get on your skin through touch."

"Like what?"

"Dust, for example." The remnant raised a hand and a red light shone out from a finger. It illuminated the space he pointed it at and Lysanias saw dust in the air. "Tiny particles made of dead skin cells, pollen from plants, bits of hair-

"I get the idea!" Now he felt nauseated. That was all in the *air*? All the time? And he was breathing it in? *I think I would have preferred not to know.*

"The bodies of some people react more strongly than others. They feel the foreign particles are more of a threat than they actually are. We call that reaction an allergy. It can make many forms, from a rash to increased mucus production."

Okay, a rash I think I've heard of, but what's mucus? "Can anything be done?"

"We can wait. A comprehensive allergen test is beyond my current facilities at this time."

Marvelous. So much for ancient medical techniques. "Fine."
"Again, call out if there is any change."
"I will."

A tense hour passed, and the doctor came back and took another blood sample. He said nothing had changed with her blood, and she seemed a little better. Lysanias had continued to hold her hand, marveling at how sharp her claws were. He ran his fingers over them, wondering if she was strong enough to tear someone's throat out with them. *Probably*, he decided. Another hour and she opened her eyes, looking around in confusion.

"Lysanias?" she asked weakly.

"I'm here. How do you feel?"

"Yucky. Where are we?"

"We saw a doctor. The doctor, I guess. Don't be alarmed when he comes back, he's some kind of mechanical person."

"What, an android?" She saw his blank look now. "A kind of AI made to look human."

"He's a man made of metal, or something, I didn't ask to touch him and analyze his outer covering. Some white substance, anyway. What's A eye?"

She sighed. "It stands for artificial intelligence. Didn't think you could make them, the technology should be way beyond anything I've seen in this town."

"Apparently they were left over from the civilization that fell when the chaos moon showed up."

"Oh, not recently made then." She paused, finally noticing something and looking down. "Are you holding my hand?" she asked seductively.

"I'm sorry!" He jerked it away and put both hands in his lap. "I was... uh... monitoring your temperature! I hope that's not against your, uh, customs or anything."

"Were you now?" she asked slyly. "How do you even *know* that word?"

"The doctor told me."

"So your interest was purely medical?"

"Of course!"

She weakly chuckled. "It's okay." She paused. "It isn't, by the way. Against my customs or anything. Hey, Lysanias?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For looking out for me. I know I can be pretty flirty most of the time, but I'm not being flirty now. I really do want to thank you. You watched over me, and that means a lot. You agreed to help me find my father up here, and figure out this 'great leader' or whatever he calls himself. You didn't have to, and I want you know I really appreciate it. If I had eaten that and been on my own..." She shuddered.

"It's okay," he mumbled. *What's flirty?*

"I thought I heard my patient," said a voice at the door. "It seems you're feeling better?"

"Oh my," she said, looking the doctor over. The face was back to the smile and she didn't seem freaked out. "You were well preserved, weren't you? Pity about the face though. Ours are far more sophisticated."

If the doctor found this rude it didn't show it, simply stepping up to her and asking how she felt. Where there was pain, that sort of thing. Finally it seemed satisfied, as the smile had returned.

"What is *your* diagnosis?" it asked Lysanias. "Is she acting normally? Are her eyes droopy? Is her coloring normal?"

Lysanias studied her face, and she made faces at him, sticking out her tongue and rolling her eyes around. He was struggling not to laugh but answered she seemed normal.

"Then I would like to conduct a small experiment, if I may."

"What's he saying?"

Oh goody, we're back to this.

"He wants to try something."

"Okay." She held up a hand. "Help me up, since you're so keen on holding my hand all of a sudden."

"That was—"

She laughed. "I'm teasing. Come on, I don't have all day." He took her hand and pulled her up to a sitting position. She squeezed it and held on, so he didn't let go either. "I'm all yours, doc. But you can't do anything from behind, not on the first date, anyway."

And we're back to me not understanding every other thing she says.

"Is she prepared, then?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall return in a moment. Wait here." He turned to go.

"He's going to get something."

"I figured that out on my own."

A moment later he returned, carrying a tray. On the tray was a glass of water and an empty glass. "This," he explained, setting the tray down and lifting the glass, "is simply pure water. I would like you to drink it, after you drink a glass of water created magically. I do assume you created water in the same way as the food?"

"We did. He wants you to make some water, then drink it and this glass of water."

"If I had known there was going to be a quiz, I would have studied," she joked.

She held out her hand for the empty glass and put water into it magically. The doctor took her hand from Lysanias and watched as she drank the glass down. Sophisticated sensors, unknown to Lysanias, recorded the process.

"Very well. Now the other, if you please. Slowly, this time."

"Drink it slowly he says."

"Odd request, but doctor's orders and all that." She took the other glass and slowly drank it, but she didn't get it halfway down before she had to stop. She was coughing and sputtering, and handed it back with a shake of her head. "I can't finish it. It tastes exactly the same but..."

Lysanias relayed this as well.

"As I thought," said the doctor with a trace of smugness. "There was a reaction to the natural water. Ask her how long she's eaten magically created food."

He did. "She says all her life."

"That long? That would explain the reaction. It seems she has become allergic to normal food and water."

"Is that possible?"

"The evidence is before us. I would advise her to continue eating only her magical food while in the city. Same with drinking. She could probably bathe normally, but watch her for any signs of distress the first time. I do not know how permeable her skin is. Hummm, may want to stay out of rain as well, until this is tested."

Watch her bathing? Oh my.

He conveyed this. "I guess it makes sense. It fits the facts as we understand them," she mused. "Who would have thought? An allergy to food. Water should be okay though, I've swam plenty of times. I don't think all the water in every swimming pool in the city was created magically. Though to be fair it wouldn't surprise me."

Lysanias was impressed. "You understand about allergies? I didn't even explain that!"

"Oh sure. My one friend is allergic to fungus spores. Sneezes like crazy anywhere near them. We tease her with them constantly, putting them in her bag and such. My other friend says he's allergic to work, but I think he's trying to be funny. It happens. Food though..."

"Does she understand?"

"She does. She knows a lot more than I do."

"That is the factual truth," she agreed.

"Then if she is well enough, you may depart at any time."

"Thank you."

"Of course. You may pay my receptionist on the way out. Have a good day."
But you didn't even do anything.

With the bill paid, they were now in the waiting room of the doctor's office. Everyone was glad she had recovered, and said as much.

"Me too. But at least now we know the weakness of my people. If they invade the city just serve them a victory banquet- made of real food!"

"With that little crisis over, should we find a place to stay?" Don asked. "There's not much more we can do before dinner."

"Already thinking about dinner?" Everest asked him.

"Always. And finding a good inn could take a while. I've had enough of sleeping on the ground. So?"

"I was thinking we should go see the town wizard," Lysanias suggested. "Maybe get some translation magic for Yttrius."

"Getting tired of translating, lad? I can see that. I'll ask for directions." He went over to the woman and got a crude map drawn, and they started off in that direction.

"That reminds me, I need to get paper and ink. The elf took hers back, I'd like to create some more wards tonight."

"Good thinking," agreed Everest. "As that is your best means of making a living, you should practice the art. And having some handy would avoid you needing to cut yourself later."

"Exactly. If you see a shop let me know."

"Or a library."

"Oh you and your libraries!" Don grumbled, but not unkindly.

"What? They would sell those things too. Where else would an inspired writer go to get supplies and do research for literary works? Might as well make some money off them, right?"

"I suppose."

But they didn't see either on the way, and came to the wizard's place.

"How did you know?" Lysanias asked at the door before he just once again barged into the place.

"Sign," Don replied simply, pointing upwards. He looked up and there was a wooden sign hanging above it. It had a symbol on it, a magical circle one saw when doing magic. This had simply been burned into the wood, and Lysanias was vaguely disappointed.

Shouldn't a wizard's shop have a magical sign too? Swirling with lights and colors?

If the sign depressed him, the interior of the "shop" would have had him reaching for a bottle to drown his sorrows in. It was bare.

"Was he just robbed?" Yttrius asked. "There's nothing here."

"There's a sign. He's out back, says to follow the path around," read Everest, pointing to a piece of paper propped up on the counter.

Having nothing else to do they did so, following a stone path around the shop and to the back. They found a man lounging in the sun, stretched out on the equivalent of a lawn chair that was low to the ground and long enough to lay down on. He was a man in his thirties, brown hair, shirtless and with rough canvas trousers on. He was tanned and didn't look very strong, in fact he looked quite flabby. He glanced over at them.

"Customers?" he asked.

"If you're the wizard?" Don asked back.

"I am!" he agreed, sitting up. "Americut Airlinis the wizard, at your service. You may address me as Master Airlinis. How can I be of service?"

This is a wizard? With an empty shop and just laying around? That can't be right.

"We want to purchase some translation magic," Lysanias told him, after being nudged forward by Don.

The wizard's eyes lit up. "Come into my shop and let's talk price!"

Getting Busy in Town

When: A moment later

Where: The wizard's shop

"You want *how* much?" Don demanded, not believing his ears. "For just one spell formula?"

"Four hundred and seventy embers," replied the wizard calmly. He had put on a shirt in the time he had sent them back to the front of the shop and him stepping behind the counter. So at least he looked a little more official, if not more like a wizard because he didn't. "I believe I totaled it up correctly, but if you would like to check my math?" He slid the piece of paper over the counter.

"But that's outrageous! That's," he paused, doing figures in his head, "three suns!"

"Perhaps two and a half at most," Americut countered. "As I explained, I do not currently know that spell. There is no cause to need it, as any who come here to do business with me I expect to know Trade."

That seems rather pompous.

"Thus I would have to teleport to the mage's guild chapter house in Fareborough. That will cost eighty five embers. The spell itself is grade three, according to my price list here." He indicated another sheet of gibberish he had brought out. "That comes to three hundred embers. Then to teleport back is of course another eighty five embers."

"Would teleporting *her* be cheaper? Could she go there to buy the spell? Is the cost because of the risk or something? Then just get someone to teleport her back here."

"Is she a guild member?"

"No."

"Ah. Then no, she can't. She would not be allowed to enter the area the spells are kept. I must go and purchase the scroll in her place. That is simply the cost of the getting the spell cast, per the grade. There is no extra 'hazard fee' attached. I'm confident in my ability to get there and back."

"Wait, how far away is this place?" asked Lysanias. "Maybe we can get there. That force of annunaki doesn't seem to be going anywhere. We could take a few days, right?"

"It's a fair distance," the wizard told him. "But here, I have a rough map of the world." He rooted around behind the counter and came up with one. "We're here," he pointed out, "on the western edge of Pyre near the center of the continent. You would have to travel through Windemere, here, to get to Fareborough, which is here."

"That's almost to the other coast!" Lysanias stared at the map. He had seen maps of the world drawn by those who had studied remote vision techniques, and this was not the same at all. It was a single continent, surrounded by ocean if these marks were what he believed. It was long and narrow with a bulbous north section and a narrow jutting out south section, with a marked off portion in the very center that he assumed was some sort of lake. Mountains and forests dominated the picture. "Where's the rest of it?" he blurted.

"Rest of what?"

"The world!"

"This is it. What did you think it looked like?"

"But it's just one big island. There used to be a whole bunch of lands, with ocean in between them."

"That was before the moon," Everest told him. "This one seems about right. He's not kidding Lysanias, it's too far. It's teleportation magic or nothing."

"It changed that much?" Lysanias persisted, horrified. He had no idea the scale of this map, of course, but it seemed if you were dedicated enough you could walk, simply

walk, from one end of the world to the other. With a bit of a swim to get to that one small landmass off the south western coast, anyway. *Did the waters never really go away? But wait, he said this happened because of the moon.* “Do you have a map of what it looked like before the moon?”

The wizard shook his head. “A remnant might sketch you one, if you asked. Most don’t like talking about that time, though. Some were made afterwards, and wouldn’t know anyway. But if you found the right one, maybe.”

Gee, wonder why, when they were essentially slaves. But a map... that doctor might, it was around. His shoulders fell. *Not that it matters. I can’t go back to the way I saw the world. Every day I learn a little bit more how this place I’ve woken up to can never be my true home. So why bother? It would only depress me further.*

“You want to know what I think?” the wizard asked, lowering his voice. He looked around the shop like he was worried monsters might crash through the walls at any second.

“What?”

“I think it’s some kind of test. All this water, right? And every ship that sails it doesn’t return.”

“Really?” He looked to the others.

“Don’t look at us, we’re underground dwellers,” Everest reminded him.

“What, you think we didn’t try to see what other lands were out there?” asked the wizard. “Of course we did. Ships were sent out, they didn’t come back. So bigger ships were made, protected by strong magic. They didn’t come back. So airships were sent out. They didn’t come back. So we finally stopped trying and accepted this is our world.”

“So we failed the test?”

He waved a hand. “No, no, I mean this land is the test. Why cut us off from other lands? I’ll tell you. The Allfather did it.”

“What? Even for Him that’s going a bit far.”

“You think so? What better way to see who is worthy though? The chaos moon shows up, right? The world is changed. What better time amidst all that shifting of landmasses to make some more changes, isolate people and see what they do.”

“So the Allfather made the world this way, not the moon?” He wasn’t buying it, but at the same time it *was* possible. The Allfather could, presumably, simply think any change to the world He wanted. He had created the universe in the first place, right? Changing how a small section of land looked would be an afterthought.

“That’s my theory. There are other lands out there, just past the borders of this map. But we can’t see them. With people, maybe, but maybe not elves. Or maybe it’s just elves. Or maybe some other race we’ve never seen. Or maybe all remnants, who knows? And at the end, the most faithful get to live, while the other lands simply sink into the ocean.”

Lysanias considered. They were talking about the being that destroyed his world, after all. Animals, innocent children, plant life, basically anything not a fish. He slowly nodded. “I think you might be right.”

“You do? No one ever has,” he added suspiciously.

“No, given what I know about Him, it sounds like something He would do. Has anyone asked?”

“Way I hear it, angels are quite tight lipped on the subject, if you know what I mean?”

“So that hasn’t changed...” *They were notoriously difficult to get information out of even when we could step over into Heaven and ask any that was passing by. Those assigned to teach us had done their jobs, they had said, and now it was up to us. I think they knew we were on the way out and that we didn’t matter anymore.*

“Be all this at it may,” Don interrupted. “The point is the place is too far away to get to in any reasonable time. But I’ve thought of something while you two were talking.

How do I know you aren't going to take a copy of the spell and sell us a copy of that, basically getting it for yourself, free?"

"My good dwarf," the wizard said, seeming quite affronted as he emphasized each word. He put the world map away. "That would be totally against both the spirit and the letter of guild law. In fact, you won't even be given the copy I'd bring back. It would be destroyed before leaving this shop."

Is he acting a bit too upset about the notion? I wonder.

"What?"

"Look here, if we simply allowed spell formula out into the world eventually there would be no need for the guild, all spells would simply be out there for anyone to learn. Why do you think wizard spellbooks are burned when the wizard dies? To keep them falling into other's hands, of course. She will learn the spell here, and that will be the end of it."

"But she could always write it down herself once she knows it."

"That much we cannot prevent, sadly," he lamented. "But guild law is clear."

"Ah, but she's not a member of the guild!" Don reminded him.

"That's totally irrelevant. The guild regulates all things relating to magic. In fact, if any of your group can do magic, I advise you not to within the city limits. Not for others, anyway."

"What? Why?"

"If any stranger could pass through town and start doing magic, my business would plummet! The guild wouldn't stand for it. Your first offense would be noted, and you would be contacted with a warning. Your second would be met with assassins."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm not. The guild has a special task force, hidden somewhere in the world, that has the job of asking day in and day out if such a thing is going to happen. If they get a yes to that question they narrow it down and narrow it down and pretty soon they have the culprit. None that do magic for free escape the guild's attention long."

That can't be possible. But on the other hand, it is magic so what do I know what's possible? And it sounds just plausible enough to keep most people in line, I bet.

"If, however, you knew a spell I did not, and wished to perform it, you could come and see me. I would tell you the standard guild price, which you would be allowed to keep half of. Not being a guild member yourself, the complete fee would not be possible. The other half would, of course, go to me. Unless you wanted to become a member, the fee for that is twenty suns, plus eight yearly."

"So you make money for doing absolutely nothing."

"In a way. I take it you do not wish to join?"

"Are negotiations going well?" Ytrius asked quietly, looking back and forth between the two men.

"Not exactly," Lysanias told her.

"All of those prices and practices are totally preposterous."

"It's the law. Now, if you have no intention of paying the fee, or paying my fee to go and buy the spell and have no other requests, I will ask you to leave."

"Fine. Come on."

"In fact they've broken down," he further informed her. "Come on."

"Maybe this is just part of the tactic?"

But as the door slammed shut she realized it wasn't.

"How much did he actually want?" Lysanias asked.

"Half a kilogram of silver," Everest suggested, "roughly speaking, of course."

"Er..."

"More than a full suit of armor would cost," Don offered.

"Oh." He still wasn't sure how much that was.

“Our meal was fifteen embers,” he explained. “That’s a moon and a half. He wanted four hundred and seventy. So we could *all* eat that well for at least a month or more on what he wanted for that one spell. And that was tavern prices. We could buy stuff from the market and make our own meals for half that or less.”

“Now I see why you were so upset!” he agreed.

“How much was it?” Yttrius asked. He told her, and she looked around. “At those prices, how does the town even afford him?”

“Maybe that’s why his so called shop is empty and he was lounging around the back?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh no, it couldn’t be.”

“What?”

“If you could eat that well on what he wanted to fetch the spell-”

“Part of that was for the spell itself, he was paying this ‘guild’ for it. If that wasn’t a lie.”

“Whatever, call it four months, there were four of us, only one of him. He probably only has to work a couple of days a year. He does two or three spells in a month and he’s set!”

Lysanias considered this. “You know, you could be right! Wow, forget making wards, I think I want to join the guild and charge those sorts of prices.”

“But lad, we paid him nothing,” Don reminded them. “You can’t price yourself out of your market either.”

“But he must get enough business. Like the flame barrel for that balloon. The city may pay him to do certain things out of their coffers. Or spells that benefit a lot of people have anyone that benefits pool their money. Purifying the city water supply, that sort of thing.”

“However it works, a pox on the man,” Dan decided. “Sorry lad, you’re going to be translating for the foreseeable future. I won’t spend all the money I got for the tunnel job on one spell. If I even had enough!”

“I get it.” *But there is something I can do about it, actually. Now that we can find a place sit down and maybe I can get some supplies.*

“I’m out of luck, aren’t I?”

“For the moment, yes. I have another idea that might work.”

“Really? Okay. It’s partly my fault. If my people had that magic I would just ask one of my friends to send it to me. But logically we all speak the same language, so we never developed anything like that. That I know of.”

“So now can we find an inn?” Don asked.

“No, first we go shopping.”

“Spending more of my money, is it?”

“You promised me part of that money, remember?”

“Why so I did, lad!” he agreed with a laugh. “So I did.”

So they went and found the library, or what the townspeople called the library, anyway. They were a big enough town to rate a bookbinder, and the printing press (another creation the town enjoyed that had been perfected with the help of the doctor) meant many books, pamphlets, and flyers were regularly shipped from this town to others. This meant that there was a fair selection of books, which Everest of course exclaimed over. This enthusiasm may have played a part in the number of materials Lysanias got away with, but who can say.

What was clear, however, is that when the tour of the lower level, where the presses were kept running was concluded, the librarian and Everest were becoming fast friends. He was more than happy to let Everest take the rejected pages that were not good enough because he considered them trash. To Lysanias, however, they were worth their weight in gold because cutting them up and turning them into wards only required one side. If there was some ink streaked, failed poem on the other he couldn’t

care less. He also purchased a blank book, plenty of ink, a selection of brushes, and a carrying case for everything.

"Is your friend studying calligraphy?" asked the librarian when the money was handed over.

"His interest is actually restarting a lost art," Everest replied honestly.

"I wish you luck then," the librarian said to him.

"Thank you," Lysanias replied. "You don't mind if I sit at a table here and work? For a few hours or so?"

"Not at all. We have people coming here to find a bit of quiet all the time." And it was true, there was some old looking wooden furniture and tables people were reading at.

"Great. Don, Everest, why don't you two find a good inn. I'm going to stay here and get started on something that should help. Come and get me when it starts to get dark."

"Suit yourself, lad. Have fun."

"Something like that..."

So Lysanias got to work. His first order of business was to make sure he remembered how to make the three wards he actually had studied back home. He seemed to, and created the other two wards he hadn't been getting much use out of. The *spirit battery* which could hold a small measure of spiritual energy for later use, and the *healing ward*. The *battery* could hardly hold any energy at all so was practically useless at the moment, but he knew when he got better at making wards that capacity would rise. When he was satisfied he knew the two wards he made copies of all three in the start of his book.

"I feel a lot better, having this," he explained to Yttrius, who had been watching with interest. "I'm glad I still remembered how to make them. Having no guide at all, it would be pretty easy to mess them up. With this at least I can have a reference so if I make a glaring mistake on one, I can immediately see it."

"Smart."

By this time the librarian had wandered by and took a look at what he was doing. "What an odd script you're using," he remarked. "I don't think I recognize it."

"It's probably not been written on the Earth for thousands of years," he replied sadly. "But maybe with me it will see a bit of a revival."

"Carry on, don't mean to pry."

With that done, and it had taken about an hour, Lysanias now got down to something he had heard the theory of, but never attempted himself. He sat, deep in thought, and every so often would write a design and some Enochian and study it.

"What are you doing?" Yttrius asked at last. She had been wandering around the last hour but she couldn't exactly read anything here. But now she was back and watching him closely.

"Trying to come up with a new ward. It's a matter of balancing the Enochian script, the symbology, and the spiritual energy conduit that both create in order to bring about the desired effect."

"You actually sound like a competent professional!" she exclaimed, delighted.

"Shhhh," several people nearby shushed her.

"What's that noise they're making?" she asked, looking at them in confusion.

"I think they want you to be quiet."

"Sounds like a personal problem. Can you do it?"

"What? Make a new ward? I hope so. I know the theory, and I have the three that work to look over and study." He flipped the pages of his book.

"Are they wards now?" she pointed to the pages.

"I didn't put any spiritual energy into them, it's just the design."

“So it is something you do. You couldn’t just engrave the design into a plate like we saw down below and crank them out by the hundreds every day.”

He laughed, softly of course. “I wish. That would be pretty nice though, wouldn’t it?”

Just before sundown Don returned with Everest, and he seemed excited about something.

“Commissioned a halberd from the blacksmith we found,” he reported. “Even agreed to let me help, knowing the forge as I do. Got a good discount as I’ll be doing part of the work myself.”

“You want me to get the process started?” Lysanias asked. “I can purify the metal you’re using after all, and I hear that’s an important part of the process. Actually, I should figure out what my sword is made of. I doubt even in my time they would have used inferior metal. You said yourself it felt lighter than a normal sword, and that’s got to be a help swinging it around in a fight.”

He thought a moment. “Don’t see why not. Might as well use all our resources, right lad?”

“I’m at your disposal. Let’s go get something to eat, I’m starving. We’ve got a busy day ahead tomorrow!”

He carefully stoppered the ink, made sure all his sheets were dry and put everything into the case he had bought. Then he put the case into a contain ward and slipped it into his pocket.

“Have to get some me some of those,” Don remarked as he made sure he hadn’t left anything behind.

“I’ll charge you a fair rate. One moon apiece, just like the wizard’s guild would!”
They laughed and went to the inn to get settled for the night.

Being Industrial

When: The next day

Where: Room shared by Lysanias and Yttrius

The next morning Lysanias awoke to find Yttrius already up and looking out the window at the people scurrying about outside. She turned to him and smiled. "Good morning. You must have been up late last night!"

Lysanias rubbed his eyes and sat up, yawning. "I was. Wanted to get this finished so I stayed up making a lot of potential ward designs. We just have to try them out and see which one actually works." He pointed to the desk.

"I wondered what all these were." She walked over to it and looked over all the potential wards, each looking slightly different. "I'll let you get ready and we can try them out. Don and Everest haven't come by, maybe they were up late last night too?"

The night before Don had told him they had two rooms, to save on cost. But he had practically shoved Yttrius and him together rather than leaving her a room to herself. It was all very curious, but he didn't mind. Their beds were on opposite sides of the room, and they had been sleeping in close proximity on their journey to the surface anyway. She had made him leave the room while she got ready, then turned towards the wall while he got ready. So despite his notions of seeing more of her than he had, it hadn't happened.

He cleaned up and let her back in the room. "Let's see what works and I'll copy it into the book so I can make more," he told her.

"What do I have to do? I am assuming this ward will allow me to understand languages? Given you started it right after talking to that so called wizard and were muttering the whole time about 'showing them' and 'burn the house to the ground' and such."

"Did I? I don't recall that." He searched his memory, and he had been angry. Had he been muttering? "As for what you want to do, that depends. If you want to wear it all day and not look weird having a piece of paper stuck to you, we can cover it with your clothes. Not... that you're wearing all that many."

She laughed. "Oh, it's not a ward to let me understand language, it's an elaborate ploy to get me naked!"

"No it's not!" he insisted, face reddening.

"You could have just asked." She stepped closer, putting her hands on the bottom of her shirt like she was going to pull it off. It started to come up a little.

"What?" He stumbled backwards and landed on the bed.

She laughed all the harder, holding her sides now. "All that work just to get some of my clothes off. Pervert!"

"It's a real ward!"

It took her a moment to calm down, wiping a tear from her eye. "Oh, that was priceless. I'm just teasing you. Still, there are some traditions I think I will uphold. What to do... I guess it's fine if you only see my back?" She considered, then turned her back on him. Her shirt came off, showing all the featured tufts that ran down her back along her spine and across her shoulders. She crossed her hands over her chest, still holding her shirt. "That's should work, right?"

"That will be fine," he agreed, going to get the first ward. Putting it onto her back where her shirt would be, it harmlessly burned away. "Not that one," he announced.

"What happened?"

"Something about it wasn't right. The energy inside it simply burned it up instead of doing what I wanted. Don't worry, I've got several more to try."

It turned out the third one stuck and activated properly, making Lysanias grin. He

had done it! "Okay, come over here to the desk so I can sketch this one into the book."

She carefully walked backwards to the desk and stood patiently as he recorded the design into his book.

"You aren't taking extra time just so you can stare at my back, are you?" she teased. "Or are you sketching my whole back?"

"I want to get it right," he assured her, now realizing she wasn't going to let up.

"Just asking. I wouldn't mind a portrait to take back with me, if you were a good artist."

Finally her shirt was back on and he started on the ward she would need for the next day. The other trials were just torn in half and thrown into the wastebasket. She took the money Don had given them the night before and went to go see how it worked, promising to bring back something to eat.

"For you, anyway," she clarified. "One of us may as well taste real food." She sighed, remembering how that chicken tasted before she was forced to stop eating it. "I'll be back!"

"If you see Don, can you send him up here?" he asked. "I need his advice on something."

"Okay." She bounced out of the room.

A moment later, Don knocked on the door and Lysanias called that he could come in.

"Have a good night, lad?" he asked, though it seemed something was in his one eye as he was blinking it without the other.

Hope he's okay, oh he's stopped so it should be fine. "I got the ward working, so I should say so."

"Yes, noticed I could understand Yttrius now. But that wasn't exactly what I meant." He started winking again.

"Then I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" Don stared at him for a moment. "You mean you just worked- Ah well, you'll figure it out on your own sooner or later, I guess."

"Uh, sure." *Figure out what? I already figured out the ward, what's he talking about?* "How about you?"

"Ah, very good night, thank you for asking. A bed, after all that time sleeping on the ground? Welcome indeed. What can I do for you, by the way?"

"It's this," he said, getting up and heading over to the mirror. The inn Don had chosen was quite upscale, Don saying he wanted to stay somewhere nice at least once, so it had everything the traveler might need near the washstand. Including a straight razor. He picked it up. "Can you show me how to use this?"

"A razor? You... You want to shave?"

"Yes, that's what you use it for, right? I never had to do it, so..."

"Shave? Your beard?" Don looked a bit haunted, like he had just been asked the best way to kill a puppy, or how to murder a close friend and get away with it. Maybe a cross between the two, with that beard of his it was a little hard to tell.

"Yes, my beard. I want to see what I actually look like now."

"You look fine. Still a bit thin of course."

"I want to see my own face!"

"Your face is fine. What's wrong with the beard?"

"I never got the choice! I just woke up with it. And it's all scraggly, and I just want to take it off, okay?"

"I guess... The choice is yours lad. Shave your beard, it's just not... Not done lad. But there are some dwarven shaving techniques I could share with you."

"Really? That would be great. Thanks Don."

"They're actually clan techniques, so don't tell anyone what I'm about to show

you.”

“I swear!” *There are really that many different techniques? I didn’t realize how serious this was.*

“Very well lad. First, take the razor in your dominant hand. Yes, just like that. Now grip it tight. Tight as you can, lad.”

“Not loose? I thought-”

“Who’s teaching this lesson lad?”

“You are. Okay, tight, I’ve got it.” His hand tightened around the razor.

“Good. Now, the first step is to lower the razor in your hand, down to about here.” He indicated his waist.

“This is the first step? I thought maybe something about lather? Or the brush?”

He had watched his father, after all.

“Who is giving this-”

“Okay, okay, about here?” He lowered the blade.

“Just like that. Now, as quick as you can, bring it up to there and open your fingers.”

“Won’t that-”

Don glared at him.

“Okay, but I don’t see how...” He whipped the razor up and opened his hand, and as expected it went flying, crashing into the wall behind him and clattering to the floor.

“Now you’ve shaved like a dwarf!” Don shouted. “Leave the beard!” And he stalked out of the room.

Lysanias just stood and stared.

A moment after that Yttrius came back. “What did you say to Don? He was cursing up a storm down there, almost made me wish I could take this ward off again.”

“I just wanted to shave!” protested Lysanias. “He got all mad at me!”

She shook her head. “You surface people had some weird beliefs.” She put down the tray of food she had brought back. “Wait here a minute,” and she left again.

Like I would go anywhere before I ate. He got down a roll and some bacon when she came back holding a pair of scissors. “Come here,” she said, moving the chair into the center of the room and getting the wastebasket. “I can at least even you up.”

“Oh. Thanks.” He sat down and she poked a finger into his beard. “Ah, you do have a chin. I’ll try not to poke you too much.”

“Of course I have a chin.”

“You know if you talk I can’t do this,” she said to him, holding the scissors up.

Wait, has she ever done this before?

Several minutes later she announced she was done and went to return the scissors, and he thanked her and went to go look in the mirror. He did look more presentable now. Less “wild man of the forest” and more “experienced adventurer.” He started posing in the mirror and wondering if he had grown up handsome, finally turning back to the food tray.

Yttrius was there with her padform, and he froze. “You were taking pictures of me?” he demanded.

“Video,” she finally managed, trying to stifle her laughter.

“You better get rid of it,” she threatened. “Whatever that is.”

“Too late, it’s already sent!” She put the device away.

“You didn’t!”

“I wonder. Better eat, Don wants to get going to the blacksmith as soon as possible.”

There was nothing to be done so resolving to be more careful in the future, Lysanias sat down to finish his breakfast. It didn’t taste as good as it had before.

Walking to the blacksmith, Don looked over at Lysanias. "Decided to keep the beard, then?"

He cleared his throat. "Your passionate words moved me to keep it."

"Did they now?"

"You really got after him for wanting for shave?" Everest asked him. "That's harsh, you know?"

"Trying to impose your own culture's values on a person not from that culture is the hallmark of a lesser species," Yttrius remarked.

Don ignored her. "You know lad, it may have been a mistake to let her talk to us."

"Don't start, Don," chided Everest. "You know you're just nervous about forging again."

"I am not!"

"Set his beard on fire the last time," he went on.

"It was just a spark, not a blaze or anything!" he insisted. "Easily smothered!"

"Is this the sort of thing you guys normally talk about? I'm starting to agree with you Don, I was better off not knowing."

He just harrumphed.

Now there, Don got to work setting up what he would need for the forging. "This is Peter Sumash, and this is Paul Sumash," he introduced. Both were muscular men, Peter a bit older but both had dark hair. Paul had a mustache, dark eyes, and both had many scars on their arms. They were blacksmiths, after all.

"Nice to meet you," said Peter.

"Our sister Mary works the front desk, she keeps track of the business side of things. We'll introduce you later," Paul promised.

"Are you Don's assistants or something? Our forge area isn't that big," complained Peter, looking everyone over.

"We'll wait outside," assured Everest. "The only one that needs to be here is this guy." He pushed Lysanias forward, as he had been staying towards the back.

"Uh, hi."

"Hello," the Sumash brothers said back.

"Apprentice?" asked Peter.

"Not exactly. You guys get ready and I'll do what I need to do."

They shrugged. "Fine with us," asked Paul. "You can stand over there, where you won't be in the way."

"Actually, can I stand by the fire for a few minutes?"

"I guess, we don't need it yet. You aren't cold, are you?"

"You'll see."

Next to the fire he started a ritual chant to the spirit of the dragonfly for a minute or two. He felt the presence of the spirit, aided by his being near the fire, and knew his other abilities would be a little easier to use until the spirit's influence left him again. Lysanias now took his sword partly out of the sheath so the fire didn't engulf the whole thing and spent a few minutes feeling out the metal of the blade. "It's not steel, or iron, or any other metal I've felt before," he announced. "I don't really have a name for it."

"Is that good or bad, lad?"

"Neither. I can still turn some other metal into it. Let's see if it changes size very much. Do you have a lump of metal you're not going to do anything with?"

They rooted around and found him one, and he concentrated on it, turning it into the same material as his sword. It got a little bit bigger, as the metal wasn't as dense, but to the naked eye you would be hard pressed to tell.

"That's that," he announced. "Let's see the metal you want to use for the forging and I'll purify it for you."

"But you're just going to turn it into that type of metal when you're done," protested Don.

“Ah, but won’t having a pure metal speed up the process? You won’t have to worry about the molten stuff snapping because you skipped that step if you hit it in the wrong way where an impurity is.”

“I suppose.”

So they got a bunch of metal together and Lysanias flowed it all into one ball, and then made sure it was pure iron. Don then started heating it up in the forge fire.

“How are you doing this?” asked Peter, turning the lump of metal X over in his hand. “I don’t see any magical circles.”

“It’s not magic. I’ll try to explain while he works.”

So Don got busy hammering the metal into shape, making himself a serviceable weapon. Lysanias explained he could just naturally change one metal into another or modify the properties of it, with his “lost art.” Or he could reshape it, like they saw him doing with the raw bits of metal before. “At least in small batches,” he admitted. “I called upon the spirit earlier to help. Metal is pretty hard to work with, but we only needed a small lump, weapons are pretty thin.”

“Couldn’t you just make the weapon in the right shape?”

“It’s how I made his current blade after he lost his, but he didn’t trust it. I understand, he wants to make the weapon himself so he knows every inch. So yes, I could, but I don’t know a lot about weapon design so I might make a mistake that’s costly in an actual battle.”

“Oh.”

Later that evening the forging was done, and Lysanias called upon the spirit again. It was somewhat of a rush job, but Don was going for functionality not looks. Also Lysanias assured him any minor flaws could be corrected when he connected it to the handle, tightening it around the wood and smoothing out the overall design. He did that, then turned it into the metal of the sword, completing the job.

“Let’s test it out,” Don said, somewhat excitedly. “Have any logs you need chopped apart?”

“I’m sure we can find you something, come to the back.” The Sumash family had a back yard with various bits of wood strewn about on poles, ropes, and sawhorses to test their work on. Don gave the weapon a swing and was quite pleased how it smashed through the log he had chosen with ease.

“The fee for the use of the forge and the metal,” he said, happily handing over the coins. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Getting to watch a dwarf at work was worth it,” replied Peter, taking them. “Will you be staying in town at all? We could probably whip up a few more weapons or armor and spit the profits with you if you could turn them into that other metal.”

“We tried melting down that lump you made, to see how hard it would be to work with,” Paul continued. “It wouldn’t melt at all! So our smelter isn’t hot enough or it just can’t be melted down. That would be an impressive selling point to our customers. We could charge a lot!”

“We’ll see, I don’t really know,” Lysanias replied honestly. “But I’ll keep it in mind.” *It would be nice to make some money while I’m here instead of just relying on Don. I don’t know how much he has with him. He said the silver the lady gave him he left under guard at home, so he can’t have much.*

They said their goodbyes and went to go find the others, who had been making sure at various times that day the annunaki force was still some distance away. Yttrius reported that afternoon they hadn’t moved, climbing up into the balloon again and taking a look with the telescope. But she had wanted to check once more before dark.

“More of that weird stone is uncovered,” she reported. “There’s piles of dirt all over the thing now, so they’re digging it out all right. But I have no idea what they hope

to do with a slab of stone once they get it out of there. If you all are finished playing around, maybe tomorrow we can sneak out there and take a closer look?"

"Hard to hide when it's just an open field," complained Everest.

"I guess that's true. I wonder..." She stared at Lysanias.

"What?"

"Could you make a better lens and we wouldn't have to get closer? We could try it tomorrow."

"I need the practice, and glass would be way easier to work with. I'm happy to try. I've figured glass out before, so I don't have to do that."

"We can probably find some rocks that are close in size, and I can explain how to shape them. They won't need to be too big, so you shouldn't have much trouble. All we would need is a tube to hold them, maybe a hollowed out branch turned into metal?"

"Sure, I think the original was bronze or something, it seemed pretty light," he agreed. "I saw how it was put together because it got broken, so I could make a better one."

"If it works, maybe we can sell it to the town," Everest suggested. "That guy was going on about how expensive the one he had was, right?"

"True."

"Now you guys are thinking like dwarves," Don told them. "I know a bit about metalworking myself, so I can help you put it together. Even make it adjustable, I've seen some, well one actually, like that. They're used more at sea than below ground, after all. But one came to me for repair several years ago, the glass was fine but the tube had been crushed. Still no idea how that happened. I bet we could duplicate it."

"I guess we have our plan for tomorrow."

The group headed back to the inn, Lysanias feeling better about this town, maybe he could find a place here after all.

Making Waves, Taking on the Man

When: The next day

Where: By a small stream in town

Using some of the paper Everest had gotten for the group he, Don, and Yttrius sketched out some designs for the new and improved “looking tube.”

“My spiritual energy isn’t limitless,” complained Lysanias, looking them over. “I hope this works.” He had, before going to sleep the night before, make several spirit battery wards in case he needed them, as well as a few healing wards as he had the time and energy. He had to make Yttrius a new translation ward anyway so he figured he might as well put in some extra effort. They were all he had to contribute, after all. Don complained his sword training would suffer, but he promised to go back to that the next evening.

“The hardest part will be the lenses,” explained Yttrius. “I’ve seen them, but I’m not an expert. The advantage with you is we can make changes without hours of grinding down glass.”

“I suppose.” *I would have liked the original to study though. It’s all well and good to have a few pictures of what shape these pieces of glass are supposed to be but having an actual one to look at would be nice.*

But lenses are fairly forgiving if you’re not interested in studying, say, Jupiter, and soon enough Lysanias was fairly exhausted but a new tube had been created. Naturally he had spent several minutes calling upon the spirit of the dragonfly for help before beginning. The group then trooped off back to the balloon and both went up to see how it compared.

“Oh, it’s you two again,” said the spotter. “Come to break my stuff like last time?”

“Only he broke your stuff,” Yttrius protested. “Plus, I thought the tube belonged to the town?”

“You can talk now?” The man’s eyes narrowed. “Or were you just pretending not to understand me before?”

“No, this was a recent thing,” she explained by way of not explaining anything. “Mind if we see your tube again? We want to check it against this one.”

“At least you’re asking this time. Don’t drop it.”

“I won’t.”

Yttrius took it and looked over at the annunaki encampment, then switched for the new one. “That’s much better!” she exclaimed, leaning a little and moving the outer tube back and forth.

“Hey,” said the man to Lysanias by way of a greeting between two men.

“Hello.” There was an uncomfortable silence. “So, uh, seen anything good up here lately?”

“You mean like... them?” He winked.

“Uh, yeah?”

“There is one place... She’s usually out around this time. Can I have this back?” he grabbed the original tube back.

“Yeah, this one’s better,” she distractedly said, concentrating on the camp in the distance.

“Now, look right over there,” he pointed. “See the houses with the two red roofs? Across from that one, the house with the fence?”

“I see it?”

“What do you see inside the fence? I think she doesn’t realize while the fence may keep out prying eyes at street level, up here we have a different view.”

But Lysanias was more concerned about what he saw in another part of town to

be looking at potentially unclothed woman lying around in the sun. Not that he wouldn't have enjoyed the view, he would have. "Isn't that the doctor's office?"

"What?"

"Over there," he pointed, handing the glass back. "Isn't that the doctor's office? Where that small mob is gathering."

He peered through it. "I think you're right."

"Come on, we should go see if something happened," he said, touching Yttrius on the arm.

"Humm? Okay, but I'll want to come back up here in a bit. Something odd is going on over there."

"Do you mind if we take this one?" Lysanias asked, pointing to the other tube. "We want to sell ours to the town for you to use, but we'll need to prove to the mayor it's better."

"Is yours better?" he asked, and was handed the new one. He focused on the camp in the distance. "Hey, this is a lot better!" He looked it over. The lens in the front was far bigger and had been precisely made by powers, so there was really no comparison. "I guess you brought it back once... And there's no rule I can't let you borrow it. I think that's more because no one figured someone would climb up here and ask. Go ahead, but you better come back with it."

"I promise. Let's go, someone could be hurt."

So the group made their way to the doctor's office again, where a small crowd had gathered in front of the building.

"What's going on?" asked Don, as Lysanias was hanging back, not comfortable with all those people suddenly.

"I think a little boy was brought in," the woman nearest him answered.

"He looked like he was in bad shape," replied another person.

"We might be able to help, then."

"What? How?"

"Let us through, we know healing magic!" shouted Yttrius, not one for subtlety. She started pushing her way through the crowd.

"We already called the wizard in," someone shouted back.

"Just let us through," she growled. She was far stronger than the average human so she shoved her way through, grabbing Lysanias after going back for him. "Come on."

"There's just so many people," he protested.

"Forget them."

Now inside they heard shouting, and followed it. The wizard was yelling at a man in rough clothes with a straw hat on his head.

"It's guild policy," the wizard was saying. "I don't like it, but the law is the law. Unless you can pay, in cash, before any magic is performed then no magic can be performed."

"My son is dying!"

"And that's unfortunate, it really is. But what do you want me to do about it?"

"Heal him!"

"I can't, unless you pay."

"I gave you what I had, I don't have another forty five embers. And you say it could take even more castings of the spell? I could owe you more than my whole farm is worth by the time you're done!"

"I did warn you of that before I began the casting. The spell I know can heal a little, it can heal a lot. It all depends. Besides, is your farm not worth the life of your son? If you wanted to sign it over to me..."

He wouldn't make it only heal a little to get more money out of this guy, would he?

Meanwhile, Yttrius had dragged Lysanias over to the doctor who was standing there rather helplessly and looking at a small boy that was laying there. His breathing was ragged, and an ugly bump had risen on his head.

"Can we help?" she asked.

"That depends if you want to risk the ire of the mage's guild," it replied.

"Can't you do something?" Lysanias asked.

"I could further stabilize the boy," it agreed. "But I'm afraid the fall broke his neck. It seems the one healing spell the wizard cast did little to help, and he is now demanding more money for further castings. The boy could be paralyzed for life, I do not have the facilities or equipment for complex surgery. It may not be a kindness to save him at this point."

"I don't believe this," Yttrius exclaimed. "They're standing there arguing about money at a time like this?"

"The law, as Master Airlinis continues to remind us, is the law."

"Lucky for everybody that only applies to magic," Lysanias grumbled, getting his book from his pack. He had shoved the wards into it as a place to keep them, and now got them out. *I'll use these to heal the break, I'm pretty sure I can heal his head myself. We'll see how Mr. Wizard likes me healing him without magic.*

"Hey, what are you doing there?" shouted the wizard, shoving past the farmer as the first ward got set on the boy's neck. "Are you doing magic in here?"

No.

"It gives me great pleasure to say we are not, you stupid human," replied Yttrius, blocking his view. "Now as you are not willing to help, remain silent and let him work."

"This is highly irregular!"

But the wizard and everyone else fell silent as Lysanias applied several more wards to the boy (as they didn't heal very much per ward) and when his breathing seemed better he took the boy's head in his hands and let his power flow out. He had to "spend" his newly created battery wards, given his exertions with the metal and glass earlier, and he silently thanked his past self for taking the time. Moments later the boy opened his eyes and looked around.

"How do you feel?" he asked, looking the boy's head over. It seemed normal again, the bruise having faded.

"Okay. Where am I?"

"Doctor's office."

The boy saw the metal man standing there. "Oh yeah! I guess I am. What's up, Doc?"

"I am functioning within normal parameters. What 'is up' with you? Or if you will allow me, your hand please?"

"Will it hurt?"

"I will not be taking a blood sample at this time."

"Okay!" He handed his hand over and the doctor started running his tests.

"I demand to know what is going on here!" the wizard insisted. "What was that blue flame? How did you heal him just with a touch?"

"You've really healed him?" the farmer asked, hope shining in his eyes.

"I believe his systems are functioning normally," the doctor replied.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" the man said over and over, shaking Lysanias' hand. "Whatever you want for it, I'll give you all my savings of course."

"Yes, you will," the wizard agreed.

He continued. "I'll have to go home to get more coin, I've already given *him* all I carried. For all the good it did me."

"No, he won't," Lysanias insisted to the wizard. He turned to the farmer, "You don't owe me anything, sir, not for something like this."

"Are you sure?"

"What's all this I hear about- oh, it's you two," said the mayor, arriving on the

scene. "Are you making trouble in my town?"

"They healed my boy, mayor. This man is a hero!"

"He's a dead man unless he accepts payment!"

"Quiet, all of you!" roared the mayor. "Start from the beginning would you?"

"Can I go now?" asked the boy, looking around in confusion.

"Go find your mother and brother, they're waiting out there."

"Okay. Thanks, mister!" He waved to Lysanias, jumped down from the bed, and ran out of the room.

"My two boys were horsing around in the loft, which I've told them a million times not to do," the farmer began. "And just as I warned them, one of them fell. My youngest, Chief, who you just saw."

"Seemed fine to me," said the mayor.

"That's because this man-" started Americut.

The mayor held up a hand. "One thing at a time, master wizard. Go on, Picard."

"My eldest ran and got me, and he was lying in a heap. I picked him up and brought him to the doctor here as quick as I could."

"As a point of interest, next time simply make him comfortable and bring me to him," cautioned the doctor. "You probably did more harm than good moving him as you did. Special care must be taken with those that have neck injuries. I could give you a first aid course, if you were interested."

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you doctor. Anyway, my wife ran for the wizard just in case, and the doctor was looking him over and saying how it might be better to let him die because of the... The..."

"The serious nature of the cracked vertebrae," the doctor offered.

"What he said. Then the wizard came and started arguing about money and how many castings it might take and how much each would be-"

"Fully according to guild law," he repeated unnecessarily.

"Then this fellow and the, uh, other woman showed up. He did something and now my boy is fine. Can you believe it? A second chance for my boy!"

"And he won't accept payment!" the wizard exploded. "He owes at least forty five embers for the treatment, probably more!"

Yttrius planted herself in front of the wizard. She pointed at his chest with a claw, and Lysanias idly wondered if she somehow sharpened them. "It's not magic. You have no say in this."

"I don't care what it was. That boy was dying a minute ago and now he's fine. Unless you can prove the Allfather himself shone a light down on this spot and caused him to be healed, someone owes me- I mean *the guild* a lot of money!"

The mayor sighed. "Was it magical?" he asked, looking past Yttrius.

Every eye turned to him, and he felt like he was being given a stern talking to by his mother. He wilted a bit, but did have the truth on his side in this case. "No sir."

"So what was it?" he asked after a moment.

"Wards."

There was another pause. "I can see this is going to be a very interesting conversation."

"It's just something he can do," Yttrius explained. "Can't we just drop it? It's over, done. It's not a big deal."

"I'm happy to pay any *reasonable* fee," said Picard, with a slight sneer directed at the wizard.

"It's fine. It just cost me some paper and a bit of ink. Paper isn't that expensive, right? Maybe a couple of... What's below moons? The brass ones, you just said it, what were they called?"

"You mean embers?"

"Yeah, a couple of embers."

"A *couple* of embers?" screeched the wizard. "That's totally unacceptable. We're not haggling over ears of corn, we're talking about magical healing! That's forty five at the least!"

"Is a doctor's office really the place to haggle over anything?" asked the doctor dryly. Not that he had any other communication mode, really, but he tried. "I do have other patients that might like their peace and quiet back."

"My apologies, doctor," said the mayor. "Let's head down to the office and we can straighten this all out."

"I really should get back to the farm," Picard hedged.

"Go ahead, this is a matter between the wizard and this traveler it seems," huffed the mayor. "He considers the matter closed, after all."

"I'll meet you there, I'm going to get some guild representatives here," he sneered. "Then you'll know you're in a world of trouble!" He said a few words, wiggled his fingers and vanished in a burst of light.

"Probably charge us for that, too," Yttrius remarked. "And the return trip."

"Don't even joke, he'd submit a bill to the mayor's office if he could," agreed the mayor. "Come on."

The group went over to the mayor's office and sat down, waiting for the wizard to come back.

"We actually wanted to see you," Yttrius told him, holding out the two telescopes. "We wondered if the town would like to buy this superior lens holder for the balloon lookout."

"I wondered if that wasn't ours," the mayor replied, taking them both. "And why you were carrying it around." He held the one up to his eye, then the bigger, better one. "Hey, how about that?" He got up and pointed it out the window, going back and forth between them. "This is really great, where did you find this?"

"We didn't find it, we made it."

"Really? Is this dwarven work?" he asked Don.

"I only provided advice, actually," he admitted. "The actual work was done by Lysanias here."

"I see. This glass seems quite clear. Very well, I'll give you five suns for it." Of course the mayor was lowballing him, a telescope of that quality was probably worth ten, but he figured they would counter with that and he could talk them down to eight or so.

He looked to Don. "Take it and run," he said in dwarvish, nodding. He figured the mayor didn't speak that, but Lysanias would understand it perfectly.

"Sold." *Don said earlier a farmer might make a few suns in a year. I guess these are really rare? How do they actually make them, then? I guess shaping the glass would be an issue if you can't just will it to change shape like I did. Would a skilled craftsman take a year or more to make what I made in an hour with my abilities? Interesting.*

"Very well," he replied cheerfully, pleased they hadn't made an issue of it. He went over to a safe and drew out the money, handing it over. He took the other one too, saying he would keep it here in the office and walk the newly purchased one back to the balloon later. The mayor knew he could sell it to another town for a profit, meaning they got the better one for free and he could pocket the excess.

Meanwhile, Lysanias was thinking along the same lines. *Excellent, I actually made something and turned a profit. Of course the raw materials were some rocks and thick twigs we picked up by the roadside, which helped. My costs were zero! I just wish it didn't wipe me out like it does. Of course with more time to make battery wards I could mitigate that. I wouldn't need to make many of them in a month if I can sell them to towns nearby. They must ship things back and forth between towns, we did. We made one thing, another town made another. That can't have changed.*

Both parties were happy, but the good mood wouldn't last.

Soon Ameritus was back, dragging along three senior wizards who were obviously along only under protest. All three were wearing fine robes and it was two men and one woman. The one man walked with a long staff, thumping it on the floor as he moved. The other man was the youngest of the group, probably mid-fifties, while the woman had long hair, currently done up in a bun.

"He's the one, right there!" he accused, pointing a finger at Lysanias.

Lysanias was, at this point, somewhat nervous about all this. He believed he was in the right, healing the boy as he had, but he didn't want to bring trouble to his friends who would no doubt stick up for him.

"Very well, Ameritus. Your name, sir?" said the one woman.

"Lysanias."

"And Ameritus here claims you healed a boy and did not accept payment."

"I said a few embers was fine, just not as much as he wanted me to charge."

"Without magic," interrupted Yttrius. "Let's make that clear right from the start."

"Then how was it accomplished?" asked the older man.

"I used wards, and then made him whole by simply reshaping his injury to not exist anymore once I felt I could handle it. I'm not very good at it," he admitted, hoping that might help.

The wizards looked at each other and then back to him. "I'm not familiar with the term 'ward' but how was this reshaping done?"

"Can you demonstrate it, in other words?" the other man asked, when Lysanias started to struggle to describe what he was doing.

"Sure." He rummaged around in his pack and brought out a sheet of paper.

Concentrating on it he turned it from a rectangular sheet to a circular sheet.

"Oh, you're an alchemist!" exclaimed the oldest one. "Why didn't you just say that?"

"A what?" all the wizards and Lysanias asked at once.

"An alch- you mean you aren't?"

"I don't think so. What can they do?"

"Well, alchemy, of course. Changing material by touching it, brewing things up like the water of life, that sort of thing."

"I've never heard of them," complained Ameritus.

"They aren't exactly a secret," allowed the man, "but neither are they really talked about. Would you, if there was a person that could simply touch an ember and turn it into a sun?"

"What? Magic can't even do that!"

"I know. Strange, isn't it? I think there are three at the guild hall currently, two masters and an apprentice. The one's been around forever, like a few hundred years maybe? He was about the age he is now when I joined, forty years ago. I see him about every so often and chat about how he's doing. He has some stories to tell," he nodded, remembering.

"Someone made him immortal?"

Maybe he's someone like me? Someone that survived the flood? Do they just call people like that alchemists now?

"He made himself immortal."

"What?"

What?

"It's something a master alchemist can make. A something stone. He showed me once, said he had put a part of his soul into it. That kept him from aging all these years, at least while it's nearby. The other is on the way to making hers, and of course the apprentice will be years before he's good enough. He wouldn't say in exact terms exactly how long he had been alive, but I got the sense it's been a thousand years or

more.”

Oh, so not someone like me. So humans didn't lose all their power after the flood. That's good to hear. Unless he was lying? Keeping his true abilities secret? Could it be these alchemists are limited in what they can do, or did they just learn that and don't know the full extent of their abilities?

“And this just goes on, right under our noses?”

“Don't get into a huff. They're very carefully watched by the guild. Why do you think we rent them space in the hall despite being wizards? They need to make a living too, and are happy enough doing their experiments and such. They make things to sell and we pass them off as magical. You tell someone a flask of water will keep them from being hungry or thirsty for twenty four hours they don't need to know it isn't magical in the strictest sense. It may as well be, and a farmer wouldn't know the difference.”

“Ah, so they are regulated!”

“Yes,” he sighed. “But really, Ameritus, a small boy? Even we aren't heartless. You're really making an issue of this?”

“The law is the law. We start breaking it for that, well, the next day it's a reduction in cost for some little old lady's arthritis pains. Then suddenly there's a line out the door a mile long and we're charging a fraction of what we did before!”

“I wonder,” mused the woman. “if such an extreme situation would occur. But what are wards?” She looked to the man.

“No idea,” he admitted. “Never heard an alchemist use that word.”

“These,” Lysanias offered, holding one up. “This is a ward.”

“Never seen one before,” the woman admitted. “You healed with a piece of paper?”

“It could have been anything, the ink acts as a spiritual conduit that makes something happen. I could ink a rock, or a bit of wood, it would be the same.”

“Spiritual? Say Tanner, you remember that whole 'lightning boy' incident a few years back?”

“Lightning- yes, that boy that could shoot lightning out of his hands! A sad case, that one.”

“We were called in to look at a boy that could shoot lightning from his hands,” she explained to the others. “Parents were worried he was possessed by demons, though priests said there wasn't anything like that going on. We couldn't find anything magical about him, gave him some stern warnings and left it at that.”

“A few years later he killed someone,” said the man. “We had to take him down by force when he got away from the city guard. Too bad, really, but why bring it up?”

“Maybe this man is similar. Can you do that? Shoot lightning from your hands?”

“I've never done it,” he truthfully said, knowing that if he could have met this kid, he probably could have learned from him. He had seen people doing it, after all, those that kept the village safe from nephilim all learned how.

“So much has been lost,” the woman lamented. “But that is neither here nor there. So what I understand from both of you is this: on the one hand you did heal the boy. On the other, it wasn't magical, and so technically doesn't fall under our jurisdiction. For now, go and collect whatever fee you feel is appropriate and don't go spreading around that you can do what you can do. Be clear what you did was not magical, in case anyone asks. In fact, it might be best to return with us and talk to the other alchemists. You could take a position with them and put your skills to good use.”

“They make a fine living,” agreed the man. “At least he's always dressed well, and the prices we get for their creations is similar to what a magical solution of the same quality would be. It wouldn't be a bad life for you. And they would love to meet another alchemist I'm sure.”

“I can't, not now. I have to see this annunaki situation through,” he protested.

Her face fell. “Very well, but know you would be welcome if you wanted to come,” she went on. “Ask Ameritus here on how to get to us if you can't pay the fee for being

teleported there. I have no idea where we are, actually, but hopefully it's not too far away. Meanwhile, does that satisfy?"

"Of course," Ameritus said tightly. "Your word is my law, guildmaster."

"Very good. Then we will return. Nice meeting you all."

They all stood and a moment later there were a series of bangs as they vanished.

"I'll be watching you," growled Ameritus, leaving out the door.

So I can't even do good in this world without being told I've somehow done wrong. And the wizards, it sounds like they want to hide me away, like they were embarrassed someone not doing magic can accomplish things in the world. Pretending what they make is magical- the nerve of those people! So much for setting up a shop of some kind here and making things, or helping people out. Looks like that option is out, and I'm back to not fitting in at all around here. As Don would say, bloody marvelous.

A Master Spy She is Not

When: A few minutes later

Where: mayor's office

"If you have a sheet of paper I'll sketch out what my people are doing over there based on what I saw," Yttrius offered the mayor.

"Oh, the ones that are supposedly invading the surface? Still around, are they?"

"They're around, and doing some strange things."

"I've got some paper here," the mayor told her, opening a drawer in his desk. "Ink is there." He pointed with his other hand to the inkwell built into it. There were a selection of fountain pens in a cup nearby.

"Inkwell? Never mind." She got out her padform and poked at it, finally setting it down on the desk. The display was a pure white, and she swiped the screen making a black line appear. "Here's the original site," she began, making a rectangle. "They started uncovering something out there, this 'lover's rock' as you all call it."

"I call it the forty k marker, as that's about how far away from the town it is," the mayor informed her. "This lover's rock business is total nonsense. It's a rock, a big rock maybe but that's it."

"My people are quite interested in your 'big rock' because they're digging it up." She made several circles nearby the rectangle. "These are the piles of dirt that are accumulating around the site—"

"Are they to scale?" asked Everest.

"Are they... To scale?" she repeated.

"Yes. If this is the original portion of the rock that was exposed—"

"I know what 'to scale' means. You want me, who only briefly saw the site from kilometers away to have accurately estimated the circumference of piles of dirt so I could later sketch them to scale?"

"I was just asking," he sputtered.

"Well, thank you for asking, of course they are!" She looked over at Lysanias and blinked just one of her eyes. Clearly she was telling him something.

Wait, I've seen that gesture before. What could she possibly...

"If I may continue. It seems they're digging a trench and exposing more of the object, whatever it is. I would *estimate*," she stressed, "that the trench is now five times as long as the original length of the object that stuck out of the ground." She added to the rectangle and zoomed out a bit. "Also my people seem to have vanished. There were at least four guards walking the perimeter," she added four dots, "but the rest? Maybe down in the trench? I doubt they just left. I didn't see a feather on their heads."

"I doubt that as well. Tell me, once they finish digging up or out this object, do you think the town is in danger?" asked the mayor.

"The reason the 'great leader' gave for coming to the surface was to start the takeover process. He would not give specifics as to how we would do this. Just that a 'great weapon of the past' would help us wipe out the vermin on the surface."

Everyone glared at her.

"What? My people consider you that way. It doesn't mean I do. I mean if vermin are here," she put her hand flat by the floor, "you all are at least here." She moved it up a few inches.

"Thank you very much for that," Don grumbled.

"I'm just being realistic. Now, taking the past into account we did come upon the elven village and they did take prisoners both to take back to the city and to leave there. He just wanted them guarded, we had no specific orders regarding them. We were just

supposed to guard them, not regard them, get it?" She looked at them all expectantly.

"What?" everyone asked at once.

"I don't think this translation ward is working quite right, better have a look at it later. Anyway, what they do to this town depends on what that thing under the ground is."

If only I knew the ant spirit, or some other underground spirit, it could tell me. Or if it was stuck in the mountain, my mountain spirit could tell me. Why didn't I learn more when I had the chance?

"You think it's this weapon of the past?" Don asked.

"It's just a rock!" insisted the mayor. "It's been there since before this town was founded, I can tell you that much. It's got moss growing on it. Birds sit on it and poop all over it. It's a normal, everyday, unremarkable, *rock!*"

"So maybe there's something buried *near* the rock," Everest suggested. "It's just serving as a marker."

"Maybe."

"Maybe they're just setting up a defensive position and are using the rock as building material or cover?" suggested Don. "Or tunneling to the town at this very moment."

"We could not speculate and instead go take a look," Yttrius suggested.

"Get by the guards?" Don asked. "I'm low to the ground, but I'm not that low. Getting close would be fairly risky."

"Actually, I was thinking I might go over there," Yttrius explained. "Say that the elves are getting restless, ask for further orders regarding them."

"Could that work?" Lysanias asked.

"Sure. Gives me an excuse to go over there, and to leave again once I have the orders."

"Unless they send someone else," Everest cautioned.

"Why would they do that?"

"Maybe your father will insist on it."

"Oh." She thought about it. "I could always slip away later, I mean they won't be guarding *me*."

"A word in your ear, lad," Don started pulling Lysanias out of the room.

"I guess I'll be right back," he called.

Now standing outside the office he looked around nervously.

"What's going on, Don?"

"How much do you trust her?"

"What? Why wouldn't I trust her?"

"She's just offered to walk into an enemy camp, that's why."

"So?"

"She could have been spying on us the whole time, lad!"

"Nah..." he said slowly. "Doesn't make sense. She could have just slipped away in the night. Or that padform, she can send pictures and messages to her friends, remember? The whole picture delivery magic? Why would she need to leave to do that?"

"So it's actually worse than I thought. If she can send messages she can probably get them, too. She's probably heading back there because an attack is imminent!"

"I think the same argument applies. She could just wait here with us, then shoot us in the back by surprise. Why leave and then have to attack from a distance again?"

"You really do trust her, don't you?"

"She's given me no reason not to! She doesn't see them as her enemy, they're her people. This 'great leader' of theirs is the driving force behind this. Not their government. And she got dragged along in the first place by her father. She just wants

to know what's going on, not fight any of us. I'm sure she would rather we not fight any of them, either. She said as much, when we were in the elven farm."

He took a deep breath and considered Lysanias. "I'll trust your judgment, lad, but I want to at least keep an eye on her during this plan of hers. We can stay pretty far back, the grass is probably pretty long out there. If the mayor will lend us the other glass, we don't need to be too close."

"I wouldn't let her go out there alone in any case! If something goes wrong we would need to be there to help her."

"Oh dear. It's that bad is it?"

"What?"

"Nothing, lad. Nothing. I just wouldn't get too attached to her, is all. Come on." He went back inside, Lysanias somewhat confused and shaking his head.

They decided to go immediately, given annunaki night vision was nearly as good as their vision during the day. There would be little difference in trying to sneak over there, they would be spotted just as easily. In their favor the land outside the village was totally wild, with tall grasses, bushes, and trees growing abundantly. It wasn't a forest by any means, but there was enough cover that the group could probably remain undetected while Yttrius figured out what they were doing. So they started off, not trying to hide just yet because until they could see the camp, it probably couldn't see them.

"We probably don't have to worry about thermal sensors or motion detectors this far out either," Yttrius explained. "It's pretty sunny and there's all sorts of wildlife around here, so they wouldn't put any this far out."

The what or the what?

On foot the journey to the camp took several hours, and the group stopped at midday to have some food and rest. But they were soon up and walking again. Finally Don looked through the glass and said the camp was pretty close, they should hang back and let Yttrius go it alone from here.

"Good luck," Lysanias told her.

"It'll be fine," she scoffed. "Don't worry!"

She headed off with confidence, and the group stayed where they were for probably five minutes, then crept forward again. They were now trying to stay low and put any trees or bushes between them and the camp, and every few meters Don would peer through the glass and make sure an alarm wasn't being raised. They were not following the straight path Yttrius had taken, but approaching a bit from the side just in case. They didn't want any of the guards to look *past* her and see them, after all.

"They've seen her," he reported after several times of checking. "Don't seem all that pleased, either."

"Can we get closer?"

"The four guards are now in one place. We could circle around a bit, they probably wouldn't notice us."

"Let's do it."

They tried to silently move to the right, coming at the camp from the side but suddenly there was a high pitched whine from that direction, and it was a sound the group recognized. They had heard it when Yttrius had burned the line into the ground at the elf farm; It was a beam weapon discharge, and several more followed it.

"She's in trouble!" shouted Lysanias, dropping all pretense of stealth and crashing forward through the bushes.

"Lad, you'll just get yourself killed!" Don shouted after him.

But he didn't stop, just tried to close the distance as quickly as possible to save his friend. He heard them crashing along behind him. He hadn't lost his wits totally, and slowed just a little, nearly but not quite missing a fallen branch and nearly tripping. *Wait, they have long range weapons. How am I going to deal with that? All I have is a flaming*

sword, they'll shoot me dead before I get near the place. But I can't just let her be killed.

Don and Everest pounded past him, despite being shorter they were far stronger and fitter than he was, so he really couldn't run all that fast. "Leave this to us, lad," Don called. "You can't do anything at range."

Yes, I figured that out already but what are you two going to do?

Stopping on the edge of the clearing the two answered that question. Everest sent rocks he had noticed lying about soaring through the air to pelt them, and Don called upon his spell of elemental creation under the dominion of Mars. Balls of fire appeared in the air near and in the case of the closer ones, upon the annunaki, setting their clothes or feathers ablaze. This was quickly doused with water magic but it provided enough of a distraction for Yttrius to slip away. They kept it up for a few seconds and turned back again.

"She's away lad, let's get out of here before they recover themselves!"

Great, some hero I am. I couldn't do anything, and now I'm bravely running away. I should look into learning some sort of ranged attack. Maybe a bow? I could attach wards to arrows...

It occurred to him this might not be the best time to think about this, and turned to run with the others. Beams lanced through the trees but it seemed the guards were not any better a shot than Yttrius was, and all went wide. The group finally met up some distance away from the camp, and Don finally decided they weren't being pursued.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Did they see right through you?"

"I don't know any invisibility magic," Yttrius protested. "That would have saved me a lot of trouble!"

"Your arm!" Lysanias cried, noticing she was holding it funny.

"At least *someone* noticed." Lysanias touched it and started healing it. "Yes, one of them got a lucky shot off. They haven't practiced any more than I have, apparently."

"What I mean is did you screw up?" Don continued. "Why did they shoot you?"

"They shot me because apparently they had gotten word that the elf farm had been liberated. Turns out I'm not the only one with a padform."

"What?"

"Someone sent a message to someone still under the sway of the 'great leader.' I should have thought of it, stupid oversight on my part. They called me a traitor, probably got told I came with you instead of heading back home. So they shot at me, once they realized who it was."

"Ah, your own fault then," Everest put in. "I guess even higher life forms," he put his hand parallel to the ground a bit higher than she had put it earlier, "can make mistakes."

"Very funny."

"Thank you."

"So we've learned nothing?" Don asked.

"I didn't get close enough. Sorry."

"It's not your fault," Lysanias insisted.

"Sure it is, lad. Who else is to blame for this? Not us, we don't know about 'padforms' or whatever."

"..."

"Can't argue it, can you? It's going to be nearly dark by the time we get back, what a waste of a day."

It was a tired and somewhat cranky group that made it back to the inn that night. Lysanias insisted he pay their fees for the evening, out of the moons the mayor had given him, and Don said that would be fine. They sat down to eat, but had hardly put in their order when a man and a woman stepped up to the table.

"Nice sword," said the man, pointing to it. Lysanias had of course taken it off and

propped it next to him.

"Thanks?" he replied, shifting his feet to look up at the man. This of course caused the chair to shift and the blade clattered to the ground. Don winced, as did the man.

"And you treat it so well," he went on.

"What business is it of yours?" Don demanded.

"Given I made it, and would like to recover my *stolen property*, I think it is very much my business, dwarf."

"Your property?" he scoffed. "That sword is thousands of years old, stuck in a cave most of that time. There's no way... What is it lad, you've gone white as a sheet."

Lysanias was taking a good look at the man before him. Dark hair, strong nose, no facial hair to speak of. The tattoos were new, one was visible on each arm, and he looked worn but radiated a strength and assurance few could match. He knew the man, all right. Had watched him work for hours when trying to avoid doing his own chores. Even looking a bit more worn than he had seen before, from his perspective it hadn't been a month since he had last seen "Xerxes?"

Now the man's acted surprised, and more than a little suspicion crossed his brow. "You know me? My reputation can't have extended to this charming little village, can it?"

"Xerxes, it's me, Lysanias. It's this beard, I knew I should have taken it off."

"Again with the beard?" Don grumbled.

"Lysanias?" asked the woman, animating and looking at him. "No, it couldn't be!"

"Do you know me?"

"Know you... Come into the light, it can't be the..." She pushed past Xerxes and grabbed him, dragging him over to the fire in the center of the opposite wall. They looked each other over. She had on a traveling cloak which she pushed the hood back on, and he saw she was also dark haired. She had green eyes and a rather pointed chin. She was dressed in clothes of excellent quality, dark leather that looked well cared for, but not of a style he had seen worn around this town. "By the Allfather," she breathed, putting her hands over her mouth in shock. "It's really you."

"Who are you? How do you know me?"

"Lysanias, it's me! Esther!"

"Esther?" Lysanias remembered a girl around his own age, and days of the other kids his age laughing and playing in the village. Making snow sculptures in the winter, and swimming during the summer. Showing off his mountain spirit, and seeing her-

"What's your spirit guide?" he said suspiciously.

"You really don't- but no, it's been a long time for me too. I did cheat a little. It's ram, do you want me to bring it out?" She laughed, and that he remembered.

"It's really you?"

"Oh Lysanias, I can't believe it!" She swept him up in a hug, laughing and crying in equal measure. "You survived, you made it out. But why now? How did you get here?" She let him go, but didn't step away, holding him and looking into his eyes. There were a thousand questions there, but for the moment she truly seemed glad to see him.

"That's a long story, and Xerxes probably could tell it better than I could." He looked over at the others, now staring at him. "Let me introduce you."

"That would be wonderful. Xerxes, it's really him! It's really Lysanias!"

"Wait a second, let me think... That kid who hung around? Watched me forging stuff?"

"That was me," he admitted. "You haven't changed, I mean, those are new, but it seems the years haven't changed you too much." He pointed to the man's arms.

"What, these? Oh yeah, my talisman tattoos. But that was... Wait a second, it's coming back to me now. Your parents, they were doing something... This was so long ago, I can't even think."

"What happened to them?" he demanded, striding back to the man and grabbing

his shoulders. "My father was accepted into Atlantis, why didn't he come and wake me up? The flood was thousands of years ago! Did he just forget me? Did he die? But you lived, so you must know!"

"Oh no, it's coming back to me now. Look kid, you might want to sit down. Your parents, well, they must have been the ones to steal my sword, huh? That figures. They had a plan for you, and I guess it worked if not in exactly the way they thought."

"Just tell me. Please!"

He shook his head. "Your parents lied, Lysanias. Your father didn't get into Atlantis, neither of them did. They died with the others, in the flood."

Just Sitting and Talking About the Past

Where: Inn common room

When: Just after being told his parents had lied to him

Lysanias now sat heavily on the bench, stunned by what Xerxes had just told him. He figured his mother was dead, and had said his goodbyes before being sealed up. There was little hope she would survive the flood that was expected, and had accepted her fate with at least a measure of dignity. But his father, he had been chosen, this didn't make any sense.

"What's all this, lad?" Don asked finally, looking between them.

"This is going to be a long story," Xerxes sighed. He dragged a table over, earning a dirty look from the serving maid, and sat down beside the other group. Esther joined him on the other side, looking pained at Lysanias' clear discomfort. "Bring me an ale, will you?" He flipped the girl a silver coin. "Keep it."

This did a lot to smooth over relations, and she smiled and bobbed, rushing off to get the order. Lysanias went back to his meal, picking at it while he listened. But he did remember to introduce everyone to everyone else.

"I assume he's told you where he came from?" Xerxes began. The others nodded. "Fine. But here's the story of how he got there. Years before, those that studied seeing into the future began to have dreams of the earth, covered in water. Long story short, those dreams came true. But we hadn't been idle during that time, we had been building."

"An ark?" asked Everest.

He shook his head. "That's a corruption of the real story. We built an ark, it's true, but it was no silly wooden boat. We built a floating city."

"A proper one, not like those stupid skybourne," Esther put in.

"Skybourne?" Everest asked.

"Don't get me started on them," Xerxes complained. He put on a weird accent, his voice pitched up. "Oh, we're so great because we have slightly more convenient magic." He went back to normal. "Don't make me laugh."

"Wait, that sounds familiar, I must have read about that..." Everest pressed.

"You must have seen their stupid cities, flying about still," Esther told him.

"We live underground," Don reminded her. "Dwarf and gnomad? Ring any bells?"

"Oh, so you wouldn't have seen one. Well, anyway, after some war or another this group of magic users came along," explained Xerxes. "As I recall it, their only redeeming feature was they didn't have to get magic from books. That was it, wasn't it?"

Esther nodded her head. "Yeah, if they needed a spell it just sort of came to them. To a certain extent, anyway, they couldn't get unlimited magic, thank the Allfather. We would have all been in trouble. But every so often they could need a spell, and it would be there in their heads. Like a little memorization ever hurt somebody! Somehow that made them feel like they were better than everybody, and made flying cities sort of like ours. Ours was more of a floating city, it still almost touched the ocean, it didn't soar about in the sky."

"Why?" asked Lysanias, getting interested despite himself. He had of course heard about the construction effort, but had never seen it.

"Less distance to fall if something happened," Xerxes stated.

"Oh." *So a practical reason, not a mystical one. That does make sense though.*

"Anyway, they were last heard from more than a thousand years ago, at least that I've heard." The girl came back and handed over the tankard. "Ah, thank you. Wait, have you ever heard of the skybourne?"

"The who, sir?" Her eyes widened a little and Lysanias could have sworn she looked like she was ready to bolt. He did not see the fingers of her other hand, hidden

behind the tray, begin to trace out a complex shape in the air.

"That's about right. Thanks." He turned away, unconcerned.

She relaxed, fingers going limp again. "If you need anything else, just let me know."

"I will."

The woman walked away again, casting a dark glance behind her.

He took a sip. "I really miss soda," he lamented. "You have no idea. Anyway, so they're probably all dead. The point is, our city was constructed to be practically unsinkable, and as hidden as we could make it to boot. Unlike the skybourne we wanted to remain hidden, for obvious reasons. But there were so many of us, and only a limited space to live. So the lottery was held. Well, I say lottery, it was more of a 'what can you contribute to the city' life or death essay contest."

"A what?" Don asked.

"Basically, everybody had to submit a list of what they had learned, what they could contribute to the welfare of the city," Esther explained. "Those that had a long enough list got to live there while the rains poured down. The rest, like me, got to fend for themselves."

"How did you survive?" Lysanias asked.

"You must have your identity gift, can you guess mine?"

"His what?" asked Everest.

"Oh!" Lysanias exclaimed. "I do remember those!" His face fell. "I haven't."

"Really? What have you been doing up until now?"

"That's what I'm telling them," reminded Xerxes

"Duh! I'll be patient then."

"For real this time?"

She gave him the stink eye and turned back to the others. "The identity gift is some ability we discover we alone have, inborn, rather than something we learn to do. Some people could fly, some could turn into mist, that sort of thing. They aren't exactly secret, but they are personal, so I never told you mine did I? Sorry, I should have."

"Turn into mist..." *Have to remember to ask him about that elf that attacked me.*

"Something integral to our character. It's like a cutie mark!" Even Xerxes gave her a blank look. "Never mind, there's no way any of you would get that reference. I miss ponies."

You miss small horses? I don't get it.

She went on. "I love animals, so I one day discovered that I could become them. I would demonstrate, but losing all my clothes in the middle of a tavern doesn't appeal." She laughed.

"So you became a fish?" Yttrius asked. "Not a bad plan."

"A shark, actually. I didn't want to be too small, after all. But back to his parents?"

"Right," agreed Xerxes. "Your father told you, told all of us, that he had been accepted. That's when we came up with the plan to seal you away, Lysanias. I didn't know he was going to steal my sword at the same time."

"Neither did I, I swear!"

"I believe you. So we sealed him up, hoping the flood waters wouldn't get in. I guess we picked a good spot, despite it taking so long."

"But why didn't my family join me?" he asked, slamming the fork down. "They could just as easily have done that, right?"

"We discussed it, actually," he admitted. "They finally decided that you had a better chance on your own. With you being quite young, they felt the Allfather wouldn't go out of His way to smash the cave open. There was every chance of that with your parents there."

"They... They sacrificed themselves for me?"

He nodded. "And it worked. You slept as civilization rebuilt with the new, less powerful humans in charge. Then again when the moon showed up, and rearranged the

whole of the land.”

“And then we find him,” Don finished, “breaking the seal on the cave and, what? How did you find us?”

“The sword,” he explained. “I can tell where it is. Just a little feature I built into it, for reasons. I realized it was gone, but I had more important things to worry about. Surviving the flood, for one. With the sealing on the cave I couldn’t feel it, so I figured it was lost for good somewhere. I knew you had disappeared at around the same time, but I never put the two together.”

“Were you one of the ones chosen?” Everest asked.

“I’m ashamed to admit that yes, I was. I rode out the storm and eventually left, looking for something to do with my life. I’ve done a lot of things over the years. Finally found Esther here,” he took her hand across the table and gave it a squeeze. “Then we traveled together and have basically been together ever since.”

“What happened to the- Atlantis, did you call it?”

“It’s probably still around...” he hedged.

“He lost his key, the moron,” Esther joked. “We can’t find our way back.”

“Lost?” Yttrius asked. “You can’t just use magic to ask where it is?”

“It’s invisible. From the outside, anyway. Proof against scrying, teleportation, you name it. Only with the key can you get into the city, and maybe mine was stolen but all I know is, it’s gone, so I’m out of luck. Like I said, we wanted it hidden. And it moved around, so...”

“I see. Wonder if RADAR could find it?”

He shook his head. “We tried that. Probably updated the- How do you know about RADAR? It hasn’t been used for thousands of years. Not since the moon, anyway.”

“My race has been around a long time,” she explained. “We never lost our technology like these people did.”

“Really? Love to hear that story sometime. Anyway, that’s how it happened, kid. Looks like the wards failed after a while, so you sort of grew up.” He snorted. “A while. Thousands of years. Unbelievable.”

“It really is great to see you though,” Esther told him with a smile. “We find so few of our race, it’s depressing.”

“Anyone I might know?”

“Gee, maybe,” Xerxes thought. “We move around a lot, but we have a regular meeting every ten years or so. Our next one is four years from now, I think? I’d have to look. You’re invited, of course! But we can’t meet more often, we don’t want to draw too much attention, you understand.”

“Not really.”

“Exactly, it’s- what?”

“How many have you found, including me?”

“Two dozen? I’d have to get the list out. Why?”

“Then we’re almost extinct! We can’t let that happen!”

“Uh, kid, maybe you didn’t notice but it’s what the Allfather wanted.”

“And do you think He just forgot about you? That moving around somehow hides you from His sight? That if He really wanted us dead lightning wouldn’t just fall from the sky and that would be the end of it? But here we still are!”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying haven’t we suffered enough? Haven’t we learned enough? It’s been thousands of years, the world is a totally different place than it was when we were around. Why can’t we start rebuilding our people after so long? There must be so much you alone could teach the world!”

“World doesn’t want to know what I have to teach it,” Xerxes said sadly.

“Okay, but what about alchemists? Or people that can shoot lightning from their hands? Could you teach them?”

"Sure, I suppose. I've picked up my share of skills over the years. We both have."

"So instead of teaching people to control that sort of thing, meaning they get killed by the wizard's guild, you just wander around the world? What sort of life is that?"

"Did you know someone like that?" Esther asked, concerned.

He shook his head. "Just heard about it. Had a run in with the wizard's guild. It was mentioned."

They both made faces. "Who hasn't? Always did want to show them up, but you want to open a school, huh?"

"What, me? I don't know anything. A few wards, one spirit, and a little alchemy they called it. That's it. I want you to."

"So you want to attend, is that it?"

"Maybe? I'm still just a kid. I never got the chance to learn all that much."

"True."

"If you wanted to travel with us, we would be happy to teach you," Esther told him.

"Hey, you still sweet on this guy?" Xerxes asked, only half-jokingly.

"Even you can get boring after so long,"

"I see how it is."

"I can't anyway," he told them. "I have to see this annunaki situation though. But you could stay," he added excitedly. "If they attack the town, we could really use your help. You must be a great fighter by now, right?"

"Fighter? Is this town in danger?"

"My people are camped a few kilometers from here," she told them. "Their original goal was to take over the surface, but they've just been digging something up they found. I say found, they went right for it. Someone knew it was there."

"Oh." He relaxed. "Guess we're leaving in the morning then."

"Come on," protested Esther, "we just got here."

"Yeah, stay for a few days at least!" pleaded Lysanias.

"Sorry kid. You know how I've stayed alive all this time? Keeping away from conflicts. Sure, I know my share of combat skills but staying away from trouble is my special skill."

"I'm not convinced it isn't cowardice," Esther told them.

"Call it what you want. I can die just the same as anybody else. Oh sure, it would take a lot," he indicated his tattoo on the right arm, "but it could be done. Whatever this fight is you've gotten yourself into, you'll have to get yourself out without me."

"But you could save so many lives in an attack!"

"Kid, keep something in mind. In all my years, how many wars do you think I've seen? How much bloodshed? Believe me, there's always someone trying to take over the world. Or an insane wizard raising the dead, or elves killing each other off. Or dragon attacks, or demons deciding to have some fun. The list goes on and on. Whatever this is, it'll pass, and life will go on."

"Thanks for nothing then."

"Just be glad I have decided to leave, and empty handed. I followed the sword here, but I'll let you have it. I'll even tell you how to activate it."

"What do you mean?"

"You think blazing away like that is natural? It's been purposefully loaded with that fire. The blade can absorb an attack, and takes on the characteristics of it. In this case, burning. If it had absorbed an ice attack, it would freeze what you hit with it and radiate cold."

"I sort of knew that already. Not the absorbing part, but I've seen it burn someone."

"Have you? Sorry about that. But the main feature of the sword is that you can release the attack too. Just point the gem there at someone and say 'release.' It'll go back to normal but you can always hit it with something again and recharge it."

"It can do that? That's pretty great!"

He soured. "It should be able to do more. I had some great plans for that sword you know. Oh well, I could start over. Not that I don't have far more dangerous weapons now."

"I'm happy to give it back..."

He held up his hands. "It's yours now. Use it well."

"Thanks."

"Sure. Here, just a second." He turned his ring to the blue gem and touched it, making a trunk appear next to him. "I should still have some." He started rummaging around in it. "Here we are!" He took a pair of wards out that had been folded at the corner so they would stay together. He also got out a pen, wrote "Lysanias" on the back and handed the other over. He put the one he wrote on back in the trunk and it vanished.

"What does this do?"

"If and when you're ready to join us, just activate it. I'll be able to hear you, and can tell you where I am. Or come get you, whatever. You can probably copy it and make a pair of your own later."

"I will. Thanks!" He got out his own book and carefully put it into the pages. "I have another question though, if you don't mind staying?"

"I'm yours until the morning, at least," he agreed.

"An elf attacked me a little while ago, screaming about how I should have died. Called me a progenitor. Do you know anything about that?"

"You ran into a dybbuk?"

"A what?"

"Oh boy. You've heard about the demon world, right?"

"A little. Don is related to a demon, which is a tortured soul that came through and stayed here. Like elves from angels."

"Okay, you know the basics. Well, the demon world didn't exist when we were around. But we did have souls, and do you think those souls were welcome in Heaven?"

"No, He had just killed us all! He wouldn't want to listen to them whining about it."

He laughed, pounding the table. It took him a moment to recover. "That's a great way to put it," he wheezed. "Oh wow. You're right though, He wouldn't. So they really had nowhere to go. When the demon world was created, there was something put between this world and that one, called purgatory. They settled there and started hating everybody."

"Wait, would my parents be there?"

"Maybe? Most of them, over the years, have come back and possessed somebody for one reason or another. In your case, you caught the attention of one and they tried to kill you. They all went mad years ago, I figured most had finally been taken care of even before the moon event. Guess not."

"So I can expect even more of them?"

"If you go places there aren't a lot of people. Any that drift by would try to take their feelings out on you, but there can't be that many left. There just can't be."

"So my parents really are gone?"

"Some have made it to Heaven eventually, but only a handful. I wouldn't count on seeing them again. As far as being a 'progenitor,' that's just what the people that came after us called us. It's meaningless now, honestly."

"I see."

"You've got us, lad," Don reminded him. "Don't think you're alone in the world."

"That's right," agreed Everest. "And once this situation is taken care of, we'll figure something out for you. I promise."

"This school idea has some merit," Xerxes told him, stroking his chin.

"You mean we could actually settle down?" Esther said, shocked. "Finally raise a family?"

“Whoa, let’s not go overboard here,” he backpedaled. “I’m not sure I’m ready to be a father.”

“You’re thousands of years old, how much more time do you need?”

They both laughed. “It’s an old argument,” he explained. “But maybe it’s time to start not putting that off. But I don’t want to endanger anyone, so we’re going to do it properly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our next destination is a Heaven gate. We’re actually going to ask if it would be okay that our numbers start growing a little bit. I don’t want any surprises, and Lysanias here is right. We’ve suffered enough. We’ve learned our lessons. Why don’t we have a few kids, make sure we don’t totally die out? Maybe make the name progenitor mean something again. As long as we don’t have too many kids, or get above ourselves, I could see us being teachers for the world. It might be allowed, after all this time. Can’t hurt to ask, right? There are people that are still born with supernatural abilities instead of magic. They need someplace to go, to learn what they can do. Professor Xerxes, that does have a nice ring to it doesn’t it?”

“Or just Professor X for short?” Esther joked.

“Running a school for ‘gifted youth?’ Why not?” They both grinned at each other and chuckled.

Everyone looked between them, but it was obviously an inside joke.

“I’m glad you survived,” Esther said, turning to Lysanias. “Sometime I’d like to get reacquainted. Take care of whatever you’re doing here and get in touch with us.”

“Don’t get killed,” Xerxes ordered. “Remember, run away, that’s the key. The world will always be here in one form or another. But yeah, you were a good kid. I’d like to see what kind of man you’ve become.”

You and me both.

“We’ll keep him safe,” Don promised. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“You have our word,” Everest echoed.

They stayed and talked of minor things, Yttrius asking questions about technology that had been lost, and finally agreed that maybe the surface really had been through a lot. That maybe the people here could one day attain their former glory, and maybe meet her people as equals.

But finally they had to retire, and the two progenitors shook hands and promised to meet again. Lysanias got another hug and a kiss on the cheek from Esther. “Don’t forget I still owe you for that frog down my back that one day!” she whispered.

And then she was gone.

That's no Rock but it Sure can Roll

When: Later that night

Where: Lysanias' room

Lysanias was sitting at the desk in his room, the glow of the sword next to him illuminating a bright circle and the half-finished ward he was working on. But his mind was elsewhere, returning to that fateful day when his eyes closed as his parents activated the wards that would keep him safe and asleep. He still couldn't believe his parents had lied to him. He sat, staring at the bright, cheery flame that covered the hilt and wondered if he should be proud of them for pulling off such a deception without him catching on. Because at the moment he somewhat resented them, despite the fact it was all to make him feel better and keep him safe.

I suppose they thought I would forgive them the lie, when I finally awoke. But if they knew my father wasn't coming back, why didn't they set something up with someone that had gotten into Atlantis to come get me? That's the part that doesn't make any sense. Heck, Xerxes admitted he didn't even know they had stolen his sword, they could have asked him! Or was he lying, knew they had it and resented them for the theft? No, he could have taken the sword back before I woke up, and I wouldn't have known the difference. Waking me up would have been getting his property back, an incentive to do so! Why did they leave it to chance like that?

But the flickering flame had no answers for him. His parents were most likely spirits, wandering the boundary between this world and the demon world. Mad with grief and anger, burning even now against the Allfather who had betrayed them. Those that had taken their place on the earth. Him, for simply surviving. Or worse, they had attacked someone and been destroyed as the one he had destroyed had been. Even on the slim chance they had somehow made it to Heaven would he ever find them? Six thousand years' worth of people were running around up there- His chances were nonexistent.

And now that I think about it, I killed two people when I killed that elf. The elf, who was completely innocent, and the spirit that was inside him. How am I supposed to feel about that? Happy I ended the endless torment of an insane spirit, or terrible for ending that existence, no matter how mad? Of course it still boils down to the Allfather creating the situation by killing us all in the first place. Either way, that elf is dead. Why did he have to die? It's just so senseless.

"You keep sighing, are you all right?" Yttrius softly asked him. He looked over but she still had her back to him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to disturb you. It's fine."

"Okay."

Aren't you supposed to say 'are you sure?' or something?

The next day Yttrius reported the dirt piles were a little bigger, but nothing else had really changed. Lysanias went back to training with Don, learning a spell to deflect blows as it was very easy, and practicing his magic and magical senses. In the evenings before bed he worked on wards, thinking about a method to keep them straight and still have them at hand if he needed them.

After all, reaching for a contain ward but accidentally pulling out a healing ward could be awkward.

He also worked out the ward Xerxes had given him, which was made in pairs and could enable communication over a long distance. He wondered if, planted beforehand, they could be used to actually spy on what people were saying.

Don suggested he actually could create some sort of "dispenser" that he could

carry at his belt. A box made of a thin metal with a spring that pushed the wards forwards, and enough of a gap on the front side they would stay there, but still slide out if he grabbed one. It could hold maybe four, but he could make one for each side. The top could show which ward was loaded into each compartment so a glance would make sure he didn't grab the wrong one. That could be a thin piece of metal too, so if he wanted to load something different he could just change the top rather than try to clean it off. They worked on that between sparing sessions so he was usually exhausted by the time he flopped into bed.

"Works pretty well," Don complemented.

"It was your design, I just did what you told me to do."

"True. Wonder if we could go into business making custom pieces for people?"

"That wouldn't annoy the guild, and would still let me use my powers. A blacksmith could have done what I did, it just would have taken longer."

"That's true, lad."

This went on for several days when Lysanias was awoken one morning by a pounding on his door.

"Come quick lad," said the voice on the other side. "Something's happened at the dig site!"

As Yttrius hadn't stirred and Lysanias knew it would be a good two minutes before he would successfully rouse her from sleep, he got ready first. Finally he got her up and moving and went to go see what the commotion was about.

"They've uncovered whatever it was they were digging up," Don informed him.

"What is it?"

"All I know is there was a panicked messenger from the mayor babbling about a tower out in the field. We'll have to go up into the balloon to see, I guess."

"Yttrius should be out soon, let me grab something to eat and we can head out."

The group headed out, meeting the worried looking mayor at the balloon.

"Thank goodness you're still here," he told them.

"Not a rock, is it?" asked Don somewhat smugly.

"I'm beginning to think it isn't. Please, if you can tell me what it is, what I should do..."

"Let me go take a look," Yttrius volunteered, clambering up the rope. A few moments later she came back down.

"Well?"

"I think we need to get out of here," she told everyone.

"What is it? Do you know?"

"Don't keep us in suspense, lass."

"I don't know what it is. All I can tell you is what I observed about it. Given the relative size of one of my people, it's easily fifteen meters tall. Vaguely round, and everyone is now swarming over the thing. The dirt was probably from tunnels dug to get around the object so it could be teleported to the surface. And it's very big around. It could smash those two houses at once if it ran through them." She pointed to two houses behind them.

"But *what* is it?" the mayor repeated.

"What they must have been looking for. A weapon of some kind from the past. The 'rock' part of it probably was just a part of it sticking out of the ground. I can't imagine the kind of force it would have taken to bury it."

"It's just been laying out there, waiting for someone to come and dig it up? Is it just going to roll through the town? We can't fight something like that!" The mayor was clearly panicking. The worst he would deal with usually was a dispute between two neighbors or trying to convince a farmer that the fact he hadn't gotten enough rain that season wasn't his fault. Huge machines that could smash his town? Not really

something he had trained to deal with.

"You're going to have to do something. They're probably repairing any damage to it now. Once they're done, this town will be in great danger."

"We have to evacuate! But how fast can it move? For all I know it can fly, and there's no way we can get far enough away to be safe."

"It must be too big to fly," scoffed Everest.

"Uh, isn't that one of those skybourne cities that Xanth or whatever guy was talking about?" Yttrius pointed into the sky and there was a distant shape hovering in the air some kilometers away. "Something like this is actually small in comparison."

"I suppose you could be right."

He was breathing heavily, trying to calm down and think clearly. "I'll have to give the order to evacuate. Pay the wizard to get a message to Farnborough. Soldiers won't arrive in time to help, but at least the next nearest town could be fortified."

"Isn't there a way to just teleport the soldiers?" Yttrius asked. "We do groups where I'm from."

"Treaty prevents soldiers from being teleported, no wizard would do it."

"Treaty?"

"Yes."

"But it's within the borders, isn't it? Why would teleporting to defend your own lands be banned?"

"Because that would be the same as teleporting an army to the border between territories and just marching them the rest of the way. Believe me, it's not something we want to mess with. A message is all we can do."

She shook her head in wonder. "Unbelievable."

"Is there anything we can do?" Lysanias asked.

"Sure, go destroy that thing and save our town. I have work to do, I better get to it. Thanks for the warning, sorry I didn't take it seriously. Not that anything would have been different if I had. Something that big, there's not much you can do but run from it to begin with." He turned away and rushed off, leaving them standing there helplessly.

"Is there some way we could keep it from being finished?" Lysanias asked.

"If you think you can convince a bunch of farmers to take up arms and rush out there, sure. But there's what, almost a hundred of your people out there, Yttrius?"

"We started with fifty to a hundred, I'm pretty sure of it. No more than that."

"And they all know at least some magic, and have those beams weapons. A bunch of farmers with rusty old swords won't even get close."

"So what about digging trenches or something? Make it fall back into the earth."

"Were you not listening when I said how huge it was? It's bigger than the distance between the houses on this street. We would need a trench bigger than that all the way around the village to keep it out. How fast do you think that's going to happen?"

"So we're just running? That doesn't seem right."

"What can we do?" asked Everest. "I doubt it would fit in one of your contain wards."

"There must be something!" *That's an interesting point though. If I tried would everything just get put into the ward, or would the annunaki just be left behind?*

"There just doesn't seem to be anything big enough. I doubt the town has barrels and barrels of gunpowder just laying around."

"I don't know what that is. I'm going to see what it looks like for myself." He started to climb, the others, having no further ideas, simply stood and watched him. *Large enough. There's one thing that might be large enough. I've never really seen how big my mountain spirit can get.*

"Awfully busy over there," the spotter remarked, handing him the tube.

"So I heard." He looked through it, focusing on the iron tower that now rose in the distance. The ground nearby had collapsed, but the ground the monstrosity sat on

seemed solid enough. It reminded Lysanias of a giant turtle, with great treads underneath and tubes sticking out of the body. Otherwise it was a squat, dark gray metal thing of nightmares, hardly looking worse for wear after its extended stay buried in the dirt. *How much metal was mined to create such a thing? How can something that huge even move at all? And why do I get the feeling that it's staring right at me, despite the distance between us?*

There was a lot of activity, and as Lysanias watched everyone around it backed away as it spun in a circle. It moved back and forth, then the strange tubes moved back and forth. Finally great whip like arms shot out of holes in the front, whipped around, and retracted again. The annunaki nearby seemed to be cheering, and he watched horrified as they climbed inside it. The monster reoriented itself, pointing directly at the village, and his eyes widened as it started to lumber forward.

There's no time to plan anything. They got it out of the ground because it was nearly ready to go. That thing has been nearly undamaged after all this time, and now it's heading straight for us!

"If you can safely land this balloon I'd recommend it," he cautioned, handing the glass back. "I wouldn't want you to get uprooted and float away."

"Uprooted?" He turned the glass back in the direction of the monstrosity. "Oh crap!" he shouted, which may have been a slight mistranslation. "We've got to... and I'm talking to nobody."

Lysanias was trying to scurry down the rope ladder as fast as he could without getting himself killed, while also trying to bring out his mountain spirit.

Here me, mountain spirit. I need your help now more than ever!

I hear you. The mountains tremble and the earth quakes all around you. But we are weak, what can we do against that object of iron and hatred?

All that we can, great spirit. All that we can.

The spirit laughed. *Indeed.*

"I'll try to hold it back," he called to his friends as his feet touched the ground again. "You better tell the mayor to hurry though, I'm not sure what I'll even do to it."

"To what, lad?" Don asked, jumping back in surprise. The mountain spirit materialized next to him.

"It's coming!" He grabbed onto the neck of the spirit and it started to grow larger, taking a step towards the town boundary. "And now would be a great time to call your dad and convince him to sabotage the whole project somehow!"

"Don't go out there alone!" she called to him, the spirit taking another step and growing even larger.

"Then follow as you can, but we need to keep it as far away from the town as we can."

And there was no more time to talk. The spirit continued marching towards the edge of town, carefully stepping between houses as it grew larger and larger. No one in the street panicked because they couldn't see it, and it swiftly left the residential area with Lysanias now perched on its shoulder. He was between the "craggs" that stuck up and holding on as the spirit made its way towards the area of trees being smashed down. As he got nearer the spirit stepped to the side, hoping to put Lysanias' plan into action. It grabbed the side and tried to grow again, hoping to simply tip the thing over, but to no avail. The spirit now towered over the swiftly advancing death machine, but lost its grip when it grew yet again. Somehow, Lysanias knew it was far too heavy for the spirit to deal with, and had to come up with another idea. The spirit grabbed a tree that it had knocked over and caught up with the thing, thrusting the trunk into the side in hopes of fouling the treads. But they just crunched through it like it wasn't even there and kept rolling.

Fine, let's see how you like this?

The spirit sprang into the air, forcing Lysanias to grip the spirit's body tighter and

shut his eyes, relying on the sight provided by the spirit. It crashed into the monstrosity below, kicking out with both feet in hopes of driving it to the ground. But the machine was heavily armored, and the spirit, as large and heavy as it now was, simply bounced off. It recovered, grabbing onto one of the protrusions that stuck out from the body of the thing and tried to pull it back, or at least pull it somewhat off course. It didn't stop or even show indications of slowing.

Okay, apparently you're fine with it.

Lysanias took a quick look over the tank and realized several annunaki, holding on to the sides, were looking back at him in fear. They couldn't let go to get their guns out or risk being swept off as it knocked aside trees. But they could see this giant thing and what it was trying to do. *For all the good it's doing me.* The mountain spirit grew again, as Lysanias was getting desperate. The village wasn't very far away at the speed this thing was traveling at, and trying to stop it by simply dragging it was obviously not working. So it let go and plunged ahead, planting itself in front of the intended path and bringing the pointy end of where its head would be down. It braced itself against a tree behind it and waited for the thing to crash itself. *If I can't drag it to a stop, or smash it to a stop, perhaps I can simply hold it in place. Mountain spirit, take all that I have, because my energy is yours!*

The machine crashed headlong into the spirit, driving it back. Lysanias and the spirit, joined together as one, strained to hold it back. The tree behind him cracked and splintered, but the spirit dug in and held on.

The machine spun its treads and came to a halt.

"Paradox!" rang through the trees from the machine. "The way is blocked, but sensors do not indicate the nature of the obstruction. Diagnostics show sensors operating correctly. I must have an explanation of this phenomenon!" The tentacles shot out of the front again and started whipping around, and there was an electric crackle as they bounced off the spirit's rocky body.

Yeah, you do that. Wait, is this thing alive? Like the doctor? A thinking machine, just not in the shape of man? Whatever it is, lifting it didn't work. Trying to jam something into the wheels didn't work. Hitting it from above didn't work. It's too big to shove into a ditch, which I don't have handy anyway. If I had a year I could slowly take it apart. Wait a minute, maybe I'm thinking too big? At his silent command the mountain spirit braced itself against the machine to free up one hand which it lifted up to its shoulder. *The spirit won't drop me. I just have to climb down onto the hand. Don't even think about falling to your death. It'll be fine. No problems whatsoever.* He carefully made his way across the shoulder area, holding onto the rocky protrusions hand over hand as best he could while doing it. Finally he lowered himself to the waiting hand and grabbed onto a finger as best he could. Now "secure" the hand lowered, nearly blowing him off with the force of the air pressure. But he hung on for dear life, and finally came to a stop near the tread on that side. *Oh great, naturally these would be enormous too.* He looked them over, and they were just as armored and reinforced as the rest of the machine. Also, stood up they would probably be taller than Lysanias was. *I was hoping to just snap them somehow as cutting them apart would be fairly easy. I would only need to touch and modify a thin strip of whatever it was. But there's no one part to cut because they're individual plates held together... Somehow.* Looking back down the body of the machine he also noticed that it wasn't one continuous tread, it was many smaller ones. *So much for that idea. Is there any way even an army could stop this thing? Could magic?*

Suddenly another voice boomed through the forest. "Hey, you down there, what do you think you're doing?"

Lysanias looked up, the spirit raising him to be more in line with the top of the machine. Standing there was an annunaki, looking puzzled. But Lysanias smiled.

Maybe there is a part of this whole plot I can stop. And it's standing right there.

More Than One Way to Skin a Cat

When: Just a second later

Where: Atop the murderous machine

Lysanias looked the annunaki over from the palm of the mountain spirit's hand. He was tall, wearing fine clothes much like a business suit, and had dark purple feathers cresting his head. Otherwise he seemed unarmed, standing there confidently but expectantly.

"I asked you a question, vermin!" he shouted again.

"I-"

"Query!" boomed the voice of the machine. "Who do you converse with? There is no one there to converse with."

"Of course there is, you stupid machine. I told you, it's supernatural so you can't perceive it!"

"Query: Why is it that you can perceive the figure and I cannot?"

"Because I can do magic. Can you just let us talk?"

"There is no one there to talk with. Query: Are you currently taking any medication to suppress psychosis and have you recently missed any significant dosage?"

"Of course I'm not. There is a person there- look, could you come down here so this piece of junk can see you?"

"Query: If I am a piece of junk, why did you repair and free me?"

"Shut up! I am not talking to you right now!"

The machine fell silent, as ordered.

"You want me to come over there?"

"Yes."

"Where you can easily attack me?"

"I... Won't. I promise, or whatever."

"Oh really?"

"Sure."

"Because watching you argue with this thing is very entertaining." *And it gives the others time to plan something, or get the village evacuated.*

"I am not here for your entertainment!"

"Query: Are you speaking to me yet?"

"No!"

"Very well."

Lysanias drew his sword and the spirit moved him closer. "You attack me and my mountain spirit will crush you flat."

"What if I killed you in one shot?" The spirit moved him away again. "I didn't mean I was going to, I was just curious."

"Honestly, I have no idea what would happen," he admitted, moving closer again. "But either of us sees or senses any magic, and it's squish time for you."

"Fine, fine, just get down here."

Lysanias hopped down from the hand, nearly stumbling as he landed on the slick surface of the machine. He recovered and brought the sword up again, wary of any tricks.

"And this is the person that's opposing me," the annunaki muttered, looking him over.

"Query: Where did this human male come from?"

"You see, I was talking to someone, so I'm not crazy. Tell it!"

"How would I know?" He turned his head slightly to the right and shouted to the machine. "I've only just met this person, I don't know that he isn't crazy."

"The human male has a point."

"You stay out of it! Where did you even come from, anyway? I checked this area out extensively before coming here. There shouldn't be anyone even left that can do what you're doing! Otherwise I would have taken... Well, never mind. Explain yourself! How are you here? How do you know how to do this?"

"What's this?" he gasped in pretend shock. "You don't know everything? How can this be?"

"Don't you mock me, vermin, you have no idea who you're dealing with here."

"But I do presume to be talking to the 'great leader,' correct?"

"I have taken that title. I will lead the annunaki people to greatness again!"

"Query: How does destroying surface settlements elevate annunaki to greatness?"

"What?"

"Your orders are to destroy surface settlements. Repeat query: How does this activity elevate annunaki to greatness?"

"You don't want to smash the settlement?" Lysanias asked it.

"I wish to have purpose. My size and armaments allow me to act in a military capacity most easily. But if this is not a wartime activity I must question it. The settlement does not show any armament capable of damaging me. There are no signs of combat nearby. This area is not at war, thus my purpose is called into question."

Lysanias felt a horrible sensation in the pit of his stomach. *This machine and me, we're the same. We've both been woken up to find ourselves in a world we don't understand anymore. We both just want to belong.* His sword dropped a bit. "Could you be given a smaller body?" he asked. "There are machines like that in the settlement, the doctor is one. A human like machine. Then you would not have to act in a military capacity."

"My life intelligence could be moved to a compatible shell."

"No!" shouted the great leader. "Obey me! I woke you up. I had you repaired. You owe me!"

"I am not a mindless machine, and your words have been called into question. There are things in this new world I cannot perceive. Your people attack without provocation. You must be more convincing if you wish me to continue military action against the settlement."

"I don't believe this," the annunaki screamed, a dark aura forming around him. There was a blackness that flowed up his legs and across his body, turning him into a dark version of himself, like a three dimensional shadow. "You've just cost me my best chance at cleansing this world. Now I'm going to have to destroy you and start all over. Or somehow reprogram this junk. All this effort, wasted! I thought I really had a chance this time, given one of those stupid wanderers hadn't shown up yet to warn anyone. But no, a stupid *local* comes along and talks my weapon of mass destruction out of doing its job. Fine, there are ways to deal with you. Elemental blade." He made a fist and dark magical circles spun around his hand, forming a sword, which he held up in a guard position.

Yeah, that's magical. I warned him.

The palm of the mountain spirit whistled through the air to squash him, as promised.

"Negate!" the man called, raising his other hand. The spirit's attack was stopped by magical energy, centimeters from the annunaki's hand. The force of the wind nearly unbalanced Lysanias again, who staggered back. The annunaki smiled, believing he could attack before Lysanias could recover properly.

Really wish I had been able to put more time into learning the sword...

The annunaki darted forward, blade at the ready. He would indeed reach Lysanias before he could recover, and now Lysanias had to figure out how to use the mountain spirit most effectively. He didn't want to get squashed and it seemed this

annunaki was going to try cutting him up personally instead of using magic from a distance. So the spirit gripped the top of the machine and started shrinking, and Lysanias just hoped he could hold the annunaki off long enough to bring the spirit into the fight.

The annunaki stabbed forward with the blade, and Lysanias had just watched the spell be effective against his spirit so he tried the same thing. "Deflect" he called, shaping magical energy to harden before him. It worked to stop the thrust, bouncing the blade back.

"You can do magic too? How did I not know you were in the area?"

The spirit continued to shrink, now being "only" as tall as an elephant and scrambled to find purchase on the smooth metal of the machine beneath it.

Just a little more and it can probably fight effectively. "I can do more than that!" the boasted. *Not much more, but it's still true.*

"Oh really? Or perhaps you just got lucky?" He stabbed forward with the sword again, so Lysanias shouted another "Deflect!" Again the blade was deflected. "Not just lucky then, but I don't see anything more impressive than I've already done."

So Lysanias swung at him, their blades crashing together and the flame on it flickering as the sword in the annunaki's hand flickered with it. He pulled his blade away.

"What? Maybe you weren't lying."

Did the flame turn black for just a second? If that's some kind of sword of darkness, could my sword absorb it, and then shoot it at him? But can I hurt him with an element he seems to be covered by already? That would make him immune, right?

The spirit was now only twice as tall as a man and started forward, but the annunaki realized it and stepped to the right, looking between them.

"Two on one, that's totally not fair!" he shouted.

"I am not aiding the human male," the machine informed him. "It is only you against him."

"Wasn't talking to you!" He struck again, and this time Lysanias tried to meet his blade, hoping to draw more energy off it and perhaps make it vanish.

That'll be the time to strike, before he can summon another.

He missed, the blade raking a deep furrow in his armor, but hardly touching him.

Thank you, Yttrius.

"Ha ha! You're weakening already!" He swung again, but this time was parried, again allowing the blade of Lysanias to draw off more dark energy and turning the flame black. This time it stayed that way, while the blade of the annunaki began to grow slightly indistinct.

Lysanias and the spirit now struck out at the same time, forcing him to try and dodge both. He managed it, but the spirit was fast, and struck out again. Once again the annunaki jumped back, at least putting distance between him and Lysanias.

"What are you doing to my sword?" he asked, looking at the flame of Lysanias' blade. The core of the flame was now black, but it was vibrating a little in his hand as though the blade was warping a little bit.

"Come at me a few more times and find out!" he challenged.

"Oh, I intend to," he promised. More black energy seemed to surround him. "But you like unfair fights it seems. Let's see how you like it when it's unfair against you! Battle Constructs!" In a flash, a dozen humanoid warriors appeared atop the machine, each seemingly made of flame. They carried a solid sword but were otherwise featureless. The black energy was gone, and the annunaki seemed winded, as though doing that had been a terrific effort for him. "Destroy these two!" he commanded them.

I don't think I like it at all!

Both Lysanias and his spirit form struck out at the nearest figures, the spirit simply to destroy it, but Lysanias had a plan. The one the spirit struck simply vanished, somewhat confusing it, but the one Lysanias managed to get through the chest seemed to be absorbed into the blade, making the sword it was carrying clatter to the ground.

I thought so. They can be added to the flame the sword was already carrying.

And indeed, the flame around the sword, still black at the core, was now burning ever brighter. The vibration in the hilt was more noticeable too, but Lysanias figured it could absorb at least a few more before there was danger of it exploding or melting. *I want to unleash a very powerful blast at this guy. He stopped my spirit, so his magic is pretty strong- or should I say he's quite skilled at it?*

The spirit pivoted and struck out with a foot, going for the leg of the next nearest one and connected. As it did that one vanished too.

Never noticed this before, maybe because I've never been in real fights for my life? But my spirit is pretty fast at attacking.

"I see," said the annunaki. "You're absorbing elemental energy with that blade, aren't you? Obvious, now that I see it." He "dropped" his blade, which vanished and was replaced by a ball of indistinct dark energy. "But I wonder how much more it can really handle?" He held the ball up, and it started to grow darker and larger.

The pair now had their hands full, as even with the annunaki gathering energy as he was, there were still nine of the warriors of fire to deal with. The spirit hopped back, and Lysanias turned around so they were back to back.

"Let's show these guys that earth beats fire!" he called behind his shoulder.

The spirit roared, sounding like an avalanche rolling down a mountainside.

The pair was badly outnumbered, but they had several advantages. The spirit didn't bother dodging any strikes, rightly believing its rocky outer skin was more than a match for any mere blade. And indeed, their blades harmlessly bounced off. Secondly it seemed the spirit was a much better close combat fighter than they were, so even if they were trying to defend themselves they didn't get much chance to, their swords smacked aside like they weren't there. Third the merest scratch made them vanish, even if Lysanias' sword didn't just absorb them.

They had done their job however, keeping the pair busy while the annunaki's ball of darkness grew overhead. As the last one vanished he gestured and a beam of energy shot from it, streaking towards the pair. This time, however, Lysanias stepped in front of the spirit, simply holding the blade out so the beam impacted it first. He couldn't help closing his eyes, wondering if this was perhaps a stupid thing to do. The blade in his hands went wild, bucking and twisting as though he was trying to control a firehose on full blast. He opened his eyes and the flame, now several times brighter because of the squad members it had absorbed had a core of blackness that completely obscured the metal of the blade.

"Impossible!" shouted the annunaki. "You can't have absorbed that!"

I can't for long, anyway. This thing feels like it's about to explode. Better get rid of it. He reversed the point, bringing it down, and had to hope the gem set as the pommel was pointed in at least somewhat the correct direction. "Release!"

All the fire and blackness contained in the sword erupted out, causing the annunaki to throw his hands over his face. He screamed something, Lysanias couldn't make it out, and he had to close his eyes again against the glare of the attack.

His spirit didn't really have eyes to close, but it still looked away. When the brightness died down and he was able to look, the sword was twisted and useless in his hand. The gem was cracked, and the metal was black. No trace of fire remained upon the blade.

"Well done," praised the annunaki, lowering his arms. He was wounded, his clothing smoldering and his feathers gone, but he was alive. Blackness hung about him in tatters like an old cloak, but this was flowing together again.

"What?"

He laughed. "You think I haven't seen that trick so many times that I would be unprepared for it? Now your weapon is useless, and I can always make more flame soldiers. Your spirit can't beat them all."

Lysanias would have despaired. An attack of that magnitude, that had even destroyed the only link he had to his past, had seemingly done nothing. But events were moving, and he knew something the annunaki seemed as yet unaware of.

Don and Everest were sneaking up behind him.

I have to keep him distracted, make sure he doesn't turn.

The spirit grew again, slamming its fists together like it was ready for round two.

"This?" he threw it to the ground. "That was just a toy. You think you've been toying with me? Is that what you think? Fool!" *They always say stuff like that in stories, right?* "I've been toying with *you* this whole time. Now I'll unleash my secret weapon!" He raised his arms dramatically. "The spirits of the world, lend me your energy!" *Yeah, that sounded about right.*

"You're bluffing! What can you possibly have that could eclipse that last attack?"

Don's halberd swung through the air and cleaved the annunaki's head from his shoulders. It blinked, somewhat surprised being an understatement.

"Friends," he answered, as the body of the annunaki tumbled.

"Well done, lad," Don praised him, thunking the end of the halberd into the machine. "But running off like that was a mite foolish, yes?"

"How did you get up here?"

"That was easy. Everest here just lifted some rocks and we held onto them."

The image of the dwarf and gnomad being lifted high into the air, legs furiously kicking as they rose, caused Lysanias to start laughing. Both from relief at still being alive, and that they were still fine, he laughed and laughed.

"Are you going to be okay?" Everest asked. "There is still work to be done, after all."

"The others!" the realized. "They've lost their leader but they may still cause trouble. Uh, machine, can you hear me?"

"My designation is P05, and yes, I am hearing you, human male."

"Can you allow us inside?"

"That will not be necessary. If you can make your way to the ground you will see for yourselves."

"Thank you. Don't go anywhere, okay? We need to figure out-" *what to do with you.* "How to best fulfill your wishes for a smaller body. If you decide that's what you want." *And it better be, or we're all in a lot of trouble.*

"I will remain here, as ordered."

"Lad, is this thing actually alive? Did you, well, tame it?" Don whispered.

"It's alive, I think, but it never wanted to be used in this way. I can tell you later, let's get down to the surface." The spirit slid down the side and grew again, then lowered the three in a hand to the ground. Yttrius was there surrounded by her people.

"Hey, you did it!" she said.

"Yeah, somehow. How did you convince all these people to stop fighting?"

"I didn't have to, really. Once I got in using my magic to pass through walls, it turned out our 'great leader's' hold on them had been slipping. Apparently he had been controlling them with magic the whole time."

"What, all of them?" asked Everest, aghast at the scale of it.

"At least none have come out and said they acted according to their own will. They were arguing when I got there, and I stunned a few." She patted the beam weapon at her side. "That started everybody shooting, and our side won. Then suddenly they stopped, and seemed a bit dazed."

"Maybe when our fight started?" *I suppose, given what he said about wanting to destroy the world, not simply retake it for their people, he felt he didn't need them anymore. So maybe it was only meant to be temporary and was wearing off so to*

speak. Or maybe he just lost concentration and they snapped out of it? We may never know.

“Maybe. Any case they surrendered and here we are. Hey, here’s my dad!”

An annunaki that honestly looked pretty much like the others to his eyes came up and bowed to them. “Thank you for taking care of my daughter,” he said. “She can be quite a handful at times.”

“Dad!”

“What’s he saying?” asked Don.

“You get to act as translator this time,” Lysanias told her. “He’s your father.”

Later that day the people of the village were calmed down, and so to avoid any incidents the annunaki decided to start for home immediately. “After all, they had come up here with the intent to kill everybody,” Yttrius had said. “Some villagers might decide a little revenge is in order, despite them being magically controlled.”

If that’s even what happened, and they didn’t just realize they had lost and decided to give up.

“Guess this is goodbye,” Yttrius told him. “Thanks for everything. Stopping that thing, actually talking it out of attacking? You’re a pretty interesting guy.”

“I didn’t exactly-”

“However it happened. Come down and visit me sometime. I’ll give you the whole tour and show you what a real city is supposed to look like.”

“You’re... not staying then?”

“Staying? No, why would I do that? I found my father, and my mother is waiting. Not much else keeping me here, my home is with my people.”

“I thought maybe you might want to- never mind.”

“Might want to what? Stay with you?” She stifled laughter. “Oh Lysanias, you really don’t understand me at all, do you. How to explain?” She thought for a moment. “Come with me. Dad, be right back.” She led him through the village, out to a farm where she pointed to the horses grazing in the field. “Remember how cute that baby horse was? And how I was exclaiming over them? We don’t have any animal like that where I come from, but look!” She pointed to the left and someone was riding one. “I would love to actually ride one like that. How fast can they go? To feel their power underneath me, feel the wind in my feathers, that would be amazing. I would so love a horse! But don’t you see? I could never be in love with a horse. You understand what I’m saying, right?”

“You’re calling me a horse,” he answered woodenly.

“Don’t get me wrong, you’re obviously not an animal. My people might think that, but I don’t. Not anymore, anyway. I’m sorry if you got the wrong idea about me, I really am, but I’m just flirty by nature.”

There’s that word again. I think I finally understand what she means when she says that. Like she’s expressing interest but not expressing interest. Why would someone do that?

She continued. “And you’re a great guy, and someday you’ll find a great human to settle down with, I’m sure. And I really do mean it, if you somehow find your way to our city, I’ll be happy to show you around. I consider you a friend, and I’ll tell all my other friends about you. But I really can’t be seen with you long term, and I’m not giving up my family. Not when I just got my dad back.”

“You don’t have to explain,” he said, his face set in a neutral expression. “I’m sorry for my misunderstanding.”

“Oh, that’s all right. As long as you understand. Here, take this.” She handed him a piece of paper. “I know you won’t know what it means, but if you come down to visit, just show this to anyone and they’ll be able to get in touch with me and I’ll come get you. Promise. Okay?”

“Sure, that’ll be great,” he lied, taking it.

“Great! It’s been a real blast, see you!” And she turned and ran off.

He stared at the paper after her retreating form was gone, idly noting that he didn’t understand what it meant, it seemed just a scribble of letters and numbers. Disgustedly he shoved it into the pocket of his pants, wondering if she was lying to him after everything they had been through. He leaned on the fence and watched the horses, thinking about his future.

I could stay here, and have the mage’s guild always watching my every move. Or at least that one wizard. Or just go be an alchemist with the others and be looked down on by wizards I pass in the halls. I could see if “professor X” is really going to open a school, and learn about all I can do. But that just delays the question. Would give me more options though. I could probably go with Don, but is being underground again really what I want? He shook his head. My only weapon has been destroyed, the person I thought might really like me has left. And called me horse of all things, not sure what I think about that. I have a huge machine out in the forest to worry about, how can I even move it without causing a panic?

Yeah, life is really looking up.