

What Dreams May Come

When: Three months later

Where: Long abandoned military base

In the dream, Lysanias hung unsupported between the earth and the sky. Before him floated a city, and directly below the green landscape withered and died as he watched, helpless. A long track trailed behind the city, clearly visible for miles where Lysanias hung. This was the path it had taken through the sky, carved upon the ground and leaving a swath of corrupted and dying land. The city clearly brought death and worse wherever it went. But this he had seen before.

In the dream, dark clouds swirled above, and shadowy forms seemed to leap and play. Faces came to him, faces of the innocent that had been taken over and faces that lost all expression in a swirl of magical energy. These faces cried out to be saved, to not be turned against their fellow man below. This too he had seen before, and was powerless to prevent.

In the dream, from below, where the land was now blackened and burned, skeletal warriors burst forth and ran in endless waves. Usually the dream ended. Usually Lysanias awoke and felt the hard ground beneath him. But this time they slowed, for in the dream, a bright light fell from the city and landed before the hordes. But the light could not stand alone, and he knew that without that light even he, with all his abilities now and learned in the future, could not stand. But with that fallen light, there was a chance. To stop this darkness and decay before it was too late.

### *What is that light?*

Even as he had the thought, Lysanias' eyes snapped open, and he sat up suddenly in his blankets. All was quiet, a silence like he had never experienced before all around him. In the dimness of the globes of moonlight illuminating the space around him he saw his friend, Don Fortress the dwarf, looking over at him. They had not seen a single soul since that frost dragon they had encountered on the way here, but Don insisted setting a guard every night. The dragon had seemed nice enough, inquiring if they were lost and if she could help in some way. The three had assured her they knew what they were doing and with a word of caution, the dragon had moved on. Lysanias didn't mind, guarding the camp was probably a good idea, after all. *In this world, you get to live a long time by not taking even the most remote location for granted. Even here, some weird thing might sneak up on you. So much has changed from the world I knew.*

"You all right lad?" he asked, quietly to not wake the other sleeping figure that was nearby. Everest didn't stir, his gnomish features of rocky looking skin lost in the shadows. "Don't tell me you had the dream again?"

Lysanias nodded, grabbing his nearby notebook and scribbling the addition to the dream. *All we've been though, and the fact I'm thousands of years his senior, he still calls me 'lad.' Okay, I was asleep for most of that time so I'm still only about fifteen but I'm also thousands of years old. You think that would count for something.* "I saw something new," he announced when he was satisfied to have captured the additional detail. "Maybe some good news for a change."

"More? You're just a fountain of it lately!"

Lysanias glared at him, the fountain reference being too soon for his liking but his two friends did like to tease him. Amy, the naiad they had been traveling with had left them three months ago using a fountain to return home. This was because she could only come back to the place she had left, so the city fountain was an ideal spot to use. Whenever she wanted company or just to wander about the city she could do so, then go home again when the need became too great. He was still rather bitter about her

leaving, despite protests that going home was necessary for her to “clear the way,” whatever that meant. Don had a totally innocent look on his face, as though his reference was purely coincidental. “If you’re referring to the fact we can probably finish up here tomorrow, I agree with you.”

Both looked over at the remains of the war machine they had come here to destroy, thinking how the job at the beginning had seemed insurmountable. Chipping away at it day by day, here in the frozen underground chamber where it had been sitting these thousands of years, had finally showed an end in sight. They could finally pack up and leave this frozen waste, return to civilization and maybe get warm again.

“So tell me about the dream.”

“Same as before. A skybourne city by the looks of it, tracing a path of destruction across the land. But this time when the skeletons came out there was something else. A bright light fell from the city and stood against them. I got the sense it was a person, and that we needed each other.”

“Did you see a face? Anything we could use to track them down?”

He shook his head. “Just the light.”

“You’re sure the light wasn’t you?”

“I’m fairly certain, yes. Would I have been in two places at once? Besides, how would I have fallen from a city?”

“How did your speck of light? Well, you dream what you dream, I suppose. It’s clearer than baskets on the heads of shopkeepers.” He tittered.

*I’m never going to live that dream down. It did lead us to the right place, he seems to forget that.* “For all the good it does me. Want me to take the watch?”

“Are you sure? There’s a good hour yet...”

“It’s fine.”

“Because you’re the one making the contain wards that we’re stuffing these bits of metal into. If you can’t make enough we’ll have to stay here another night.”

“I can take a nap if I need to. Or meditate. Believe me, I want to be gone from this place just as much as you do.” The silence and the echoes of the long empty chambers beneath the earth would make even the stoutest heart wary, and all three friends longed to be gone from this place. On the one hand, being so isolated had kept the war machine out of action all this time, buried where it was after the arrival of the chaos moon. But on the other there were times Lysanias had wished it had been preserved a little closer to a warm beach.

“All right lad. Wake Everest up in few hours.”

“I will.”

Don went over to his blankets and lay down, while Lysanias got up and stretched, looking around. The place was as he remembered it, minus the huge war machine, from three weeks ago when they arrived. Having taken about a month to trek across the frozen north to where his powers told him to find the thing, getting in here hadn’t been easy. *Of course, the people that built these war machines wouldn’t have wanted just anyone strolling in, would they? Given how intact this place was, they really built it to withstand anything.* He looked over at the skeleton of the machine, and the chunks of metal yet to be put into contain wards for easy transport back to the city. *I kept my promise P05, no more war machines from before the chaos moon arrived will threaten the world. Of course, there’s still at least two more to go...*

The night continued to pass, and in a few hours Lysanias woke Everest, who slipped on his spell lens and took up his watch. The lens had been made by Don himself, using some of the crystals Lysanias had retrieved in the whole wanderer situation. The alchemists had been interested in the process and helped grind down the crystal, while the wizard tutor Don had hired (reluctantly) showed him how to fabricate the lens to conduct magic. Putting it all together had taken some time, but it had been

worth it. Everest could use magic now, and was learning Don's spells. It was after that Lysanias had taken the alchemists up on their offer, making him a "field agent" so as long as he came and shared his discoveries out in the world with them, he would get paid and could go where he pleased.

*The lab is just too valuable not to have access to. I can keep my own projects there and if Don wants to do any more fabrication or imbuing he's welcome as my guest. Everybody wins.*

He still didn't know if he had done the right thing, closing the portal that let refugee wanderers into this world. But it was done, and at least that one good thing had come out of it. He still had more crystals, unsure if he should keep them or sell them for a tremendous profit. *It just doesn't seem right, profiting from what happened back then. Making a lens for Everest so he can use magic too is all well and good. Maybe I should donate them or something, but to who?* The lens was fitted into a gauntlet, right at the back of his right hand, and Everest practiced the spells he knew every day. He didn't know many yet, but that would come in time. Just being able to use magic as his friend had always done kept him excited about the whole thing. Lysanias smiled a bit as he wiggled under his blankets again. He remembered the look on Everest's face when he had been given the lens. He and Don had worked on it for weeks in secret, and it had come out beautifully. The gauntlets themselves were made of a strange metal Don called adamant, meaning the gauntlets alone were worth hundreds of suns. *But for me, changing the simple iron gauntlets into adamant was the easy part of the process.*

Finally he slept again, and did not dream.

The next day the three got back to work, pulling apart the remaining shell of the war machine while Lysanias made the wards to store it away for easy travel. He had a large stack of rectangular pieces of paper, each one supernaturally holding a small portion of what had been a nearly 20m tall robot. One only had to say the command word "release" or tear the paper in half and that bit of twisted metal inside would come tumbling out. They had come prepared, Don having purchased a spell to tear metal apart on their way here. Luckily he already knew how to cast Uranus spells so as he cut them apart, Everest helped by carrying them over to where Lysanias made the wards. He would then slap one on and add it to the pile. Little was said, but all felt the excitement of having this job nearly done.

Part of the reason little was said was because Everest couldn't see Don part of the time. When his concentration was on the spell his concentration on not being unseen slipped. He had been stabbed in the back, literally, by Lysanias during an episode of chaotic magic making him a totally uncaring jerk. The thing he was stabbed in the back *with* was a shard of chaos crystal, making it so anyone not supernaturally or magical aware unable to see him. He had worked out a method to become visible despite this, and Lysanias had offered a ward to help Everest see him, but both had refused.

"I need to master this," Don had said. "That way I can turn it on and off when I want. Giving Everest something to see me with means I won't practice as much."

"Well, if you want it removed or change your mind, Everest, let me know."

Finally the chamber was empty, and the three friends congratulated each other on a job well done.

"And how are we splitting the profits again?" Don asked.

"Sixty, twenty, twenty, right?" Lysanias asked, sensing a way to get back at Don for that fountain jab the night before.

"I'm not greedy, I'll take fifty," Everest assured them, taking the joke over. "You each take twenty five."

"That's generous of you," Don grumbled. "Who did the most work?"

"I think that would be me," Lysanias assured them, trying to salvage his momentum.

"You just sat around drawing on paper!"

"I was moving the things. You know how heavy those slabs of metal were?" Everest protested.

The three grinned at each other. "Let's just get packed up. Dinner is on me tonight, but only if we're someplace with lots of ale!" Don promised.

"I'll get the fire started," Everest offered. "I think I can manage that much with this baby here." He stroked his gauntlet.

"Keep stroking it like that, you'll go blind," Don warned him.

"Says the dwarf always stroking his beard!"

"That's why I've got it. Makes me look wise and important."

*I just wish I could get rid of mine. Oh well. The things you do for friends.*

Lysanias gathered up the wards, carefully stacking them and putting them into his trunk. He packed up his blankets and other utensils, making sure he didn't leave anything. Don was doing the same, picking up his and Everest's stuff while he arranged some wood they had brought into an upright triangle.

"Create fire!" he intoned, gesturing at the wood. It burst into flames, and he smiled. "Hey, did you guys know I can do magic now?"

"We know!" both shouted back at him.

"Just checking."

With the site picked up the fire and Lysanias' sword pommel were the only source of light now, the globes of solid light having been packed away. Lysanias held up two wards. "Gentlemen? Who wants to go first?"

"And you're sure this is the only way?" Everest asked, looking at it distastefully.

"Unless you want to walk back for three weeks. Everest, we've been over this. I have to carry anything I teleport, and that means lifting it. I can't put effort into both lifting more weight and putting spiritual energy into my will at the same time. Thus, if you want to get back to the nearest town safely I need to carry the least amount I can. That means a cozy ward for both of you, I invoke the spirit of the dragonfly with the help of this fire, and a moment or two later you're out again. Yttrius was inside one painted on a rock with my blood, if you'll recall. I've gotten better at making them since then and she was fine. You'll be fine too, trust me."

"Come on Everest, don't be a scared cat. I'll go first."

"Thank you Don. And away we go!" Lysanias stuck the ward onto him and Don allowed himself to be sucked inside. "See, nothing to it." He stuck it into his pocket.

"Your turn." He held up the other ward.

"Just don't lose it, or whatever."

"As I've said before, even if I did you would come out in a few hours. You can make your own food and water," he pointed to the spell lens, "so even if we were separated somehow you would be fine."

"I hope so. Just get it over with."

"I live to serve." The ward was placed, and Lysanias was alone. *Now for my part.*

He called upon the spirit of the dragonfly for a moment, knowing this would make the teleport a bit easier. The fire made calling the spirit easier, it wasn't needed otherwise, strictly speaking. He then took one last look around the old army base. It had been stripped out before they arrived, and anything not nailed down had become worthless due to age. There really was nothing left for him here, so it was time to head back to civilization. *But I know we can do it now. As long as the war machines are inactive, like this one was, cutting them up is time consuming but possible. Let's hope the other two go as smoothly.* From his pocket he grabbed the drawing he had made of the town as an aid to memory, and thought about arriving there just at the outskirts. With

that he concentrated, wishing there was more plant life around here so there was a ley line or two he could use. But the frozen north was just that, a barren wasteland, so all the energy he had was that within him. He threw as much as he could into his will, and folded space around his body.

When he opened his eyes he beheld exactly where he had wanted to go, the village of Baytown. His eyes couldn't help noticing the mountains in the distance, especially the tall one where the portal used to be. He sighed, wondering how Esta had fared and why he couldn't seem to get an answer when he asked the universe if the being was alive or dead.

*I hate being this close to that place, but it's the nearest town to the frozen north and they can buy some of this metal from us. I want to spread it out so nobody gets any bright ideas about somehow putting it back together. Better get the guys out though.*

Taking the two wards in hand he said "release" and both dwarf and gnomad reappeared before him. The paper burned away and the pair blinked against the light.

"See, wasn't so bad," Don told Everest with a slap on the back.

"Still creeps me out. Are you sure practicing teleportation won't help?"

"The only thing that will help is trying to build up my scrawny arms. Maybe when we aren't running around saving the world for the eighth time I can lift heavy rocks and build up my muscles. Until then, practice will let me go further more reliably but won't help me carry any more weight through the teleport."

"Fine, I get it. Let's go sell this stuff and get something to eat."

"Now you're talking sense!" Don agreed with a smile.

"Where did you find all this?" asked the being in charge of the sorting operation in town. Lysanias recalled that rock and raw ore were brought from the nearby mine on the track system, sorted, and the rock was sent back to be dumped. They had tumbled out a small fraction of the metal they had lifted from the body of the war machine, stopping the sorting for the moment as everyone clustered around the group. Lysanias was still a bit uncomfortable in groups like this, and tried to hang back behind the others. Don didn't have that particular hang up and gladly stepped up to the...

*What species is he?* Lysanias sent into Everest's brain as Don launched into his daring tale of crossing the ice to find the lost treasure as marked on the old pirate map they had found.

"Must you do that?" he hissed back. "You can talk, you know. He's a brownie. He wouldn't be offended to be asked, taking an interest in people isn't a crime."

"Oh." Lysanias looked the little guy over and the two, he and Don, stood almost eye to eye. The brownie had a wide face, and larger hands than Lysanias would have thought were necessary, given the size of the rest of him.

But the connection to Everest was still open, so Lysanias decided to have a little more fun. *Look at those hands! I wonder what else he has out of proportion to the rest of his body.*

Now Everest had to try and keep a straight face and threatened to snicker uncontrollably. "Would you stop that!"

Finally the two agreed on a price, and the twisted hunks of metal were loaded into carts to be brought to the boats so they could be shipped. Don took coin from the brownie and both thanked the other. But the brownie looked troubled.

"We haven't had this much metal in some time," he explained. "It could be a problem."

"How so?"

"Pirates. When this was a fishing town they stole our fish. Now they try to steal our metal. Say, you all look like fighting men!" He looked the group over. Lysanias had at his left hip the sword left to him by his parents. It was unremarkable now, having been on fire some time ago, but it could still detect and wound shadow kin unlike anything

else in the world. At his right hip was the quiver full of stone “arrows” he could manipulate and throw with the earth moving technique he had learned from Everest. He was wearing the spider silk armor he had technically stolen from the elves, as it was comfortable enough that he hardly noticed it, and his hair and beard were wild again and in need of a trim. *Have to remember to get that done before we leave.*

Everest had a matching set of gauntlets on, because just having one gauntlet to hold his spell lens would have looked really weird, and twin daggers attached to his belt. These had stone handles so he could remotely wield them, and as a gnomad had dark, almost rocky looking skin. He was wearing just normal heavy clothes and boots he always did, plus had a pack on his back.

Don eschewed the “traditional” battle axe he said some of the stupider members of his race employed in combat for a halberd, given he needed all the reach he could get. This was currently inside a contain ward so he didn’t have to drag it about. He was instead armed with his normal falchion and strapped to his back, behind a similar pack, was his shield. He didn’t use it in combat all that often but it had saved his life from a cave in shortly after Lysanias and he had met, so he was sure to always keep it there. He too wore warm clothes and stout boots, given where they had been. His pride and joy, the fine beard that sprouted from his chin was combed and neat.

“We’ve been known to be in a scrap or two,” Don admitted. “What of it?”

“Could I perhaps interest you in sailing this metal down the coast to Dvergerforge? You aren’t heading back north again, are you? Lots of dwarves in that area I hear, if you want to be among your own kind again.”

“Wouldn’t mind that, actually. I don’t think we’re heading back north, but you want us to, what, protect this shipment?”

“Exactly. With so much to lose it would be a pity if pirates got it instead. We would pay you, and the voyage would be free of course.”

“Just a second.” He turned back to the group and Lysanias realized he had switched languages from trade to dwarven, not that it made any difference to him but it was strange to hear different sorts of sounds from a person when they all seemed to mean the same thing. “What do you say, Lysanias? I know Everest doesn’t like to teleport but you need the practice. Did you want to go back to Fareborough directly or go part of the way by boat?”

“I’ve never traveled by boat,” Lysanias thought. “We would be heading south, and that’s where we would need to go anyway. How long would it take?”

“How long?” asked the brownie. “Depends on the winds. Maybe a week or a little bit less.”

“Is that all? I was afraid you were going to say a month. That’s not so bad.” He turned back to the others. “That’s at least a few more chances to refine this dream. I’d like to arrive back at the city having a little more information. Just saying a skybourne city is likely to rain death upon the land isn’t very helpful. This spark of light that left, maybe if I concentrate on dreaming about that I’ll get somewhere. And the more places I see, the more places I can get back to in a hurry. We have the time now, let’s get closer to Fareborough without using our legs so the teleport is easier. I can’t practice that on the boat, but I can once we get off. The practice is the same and the trip is easier because we’ll be closer. It’s a better situation I think.”

“Fair enough. We’ll take the job!” he said to the brownie.

“Splendid. We’ll put you up in the inn for the night, ship leaves tomorrow.”

“Lead the way! Oh, is our meal included for tonight?”

The other two just shook their heads.

## A Ship Twice Attacked

When: The next day

Where: West of Baytown

"How was your night?" Don asked Lysanias as they made their way from the inn to the docks the next morning.

"Fine. You?" he replied with a yawn, not really thinking it was more than polite conversation.

"What? I'm asking about the dream, lad! Did you dream about the speck of light?"

"Oh, right!" He perked up a little. "I'm not sure. I was behind someone and it seemed they jumped off a cliff. But then there was this leaf falling from a tree, and a bird was startled and a single feather lightly touched the ground where it had been."

"But nothing we can use? A face? A name? Amy knew your name the moment she saw you. You remember, when you were groping her underwater?"

That earned him a glare. "Yeah, she also has been doing this for maybe hundreds of years. Besides, she probably asked the universe my name after seeing me in her dream."

"Couldn't you do that?" Everest asked.

"Eventually," he admitted. "I would need a little more detail, I think. Right now I don't even know if this person is male or female."

"Female," both answered at once.

He looked between his two friends. "You two creep me out sometimes, you know that? And why are you still sharing a room? That brownie would have given us three. You don't think something was going to attack the inn, do you?"

"You really haven't figured that out lad? I considered you the smart one of this group!"

"Hey!" Everest protested. "I thought I was the smart one!"

"You're the well read one. There's a difference."

Everest seemed thoughtful a moment. "I concede that point."

"So figured out what?" Lysanias persisted. "I don't get it."

"And we're not going to tell you," Don told him with a shake of his head.

"Morning!" said the brownie. They had reached the dock and the ship, now loaded with the ore and bits of metal the group had provided, was about to cast off. The sailors were rushing about the deck, checking the ropes and doing whatever it was sailors do in this sort of situation. "Ready to go?"

"Are you coming?" Don asked him.

"Me? No, I'm the supervisor of the mining operation here. I keep the people in line and the ore, such as we have left in the mines, flowing. Sailing is actually work. I just came to make sure you didn't get left behind."

*So wait, his job is to stand around and make sure people work? And he gets paid for it?*

"We're ready. Your shipment will get there safely if we have anything to say about it," Everest promised.

"Splendid. Say hello to the dwarves for me!" He inclined his head as they passed and walked up the board to the ship. Lysanias nearly fell and had to be grabbed by Don and Everest before he splashed into the water below.

"Harder than it looks, huh?" he asked with a grin as they steadied him.

"No, not really," the other two assured him.

Now aboard and moving, the ship took the first day just to leave the bay area, sailing through a narrow channel out into the ocean around sundown. The ship then turned and headed south west, following the coast. Lysanias was throwing a handful of colorful stones to the deck and looking them over, thinking about Amy.

"That's where those went to," Don remarked, coming over to him. "I wondered."

"She said I could have them. To remember her by."

"You miss her, don't you?"

"Of course I do. There was still a lot I could have learned from her, and don't make any jokes. I can feel that you want to. I'm talking about her seer abilities."

"You can feel that?" Don took a step back.

Lysanias' half glared at his friend. "Maybe. The point is, we could have used her. I'm sure her dream about this light would have been far more useful than mine was."

"Perhaps, lad. What is with the stones, anyway? She said they could help her but she never actually used them."

"It's a way of reading how they fall. She said everything is connected, even the falling of these stones. I thought maybe as I dreamed of things falling, they might give me a little more insight."

"And have they?"

He snorted. "Look for yourself!" He threw them down again. "There, you see? A clear result!"

Don looked the stones over. There were smooth rocks, in no pattern or layout he could make any sense of, laying there on the deck as stones usually did after being thrown. "If you say so, lad."

"But the way the stones fall-" he said to himself, looking them over angrily. "I mean look! This half seems to suggest death, and on a massive scale. But this one half seems to suggest life! Make up your mind! The stones are split and that's all they'll tell me about this person. They are surrounded by both life and death at the same time. It's clear- but meaningless!"

"This woman, you mean?"

"You said that before. Why do you think it's a girl?" He swept the rocks up and stuck them back into the pouch with a snarl. *Stupid rocks.*

"I can see the future too, lad. And I don't need any stones to do it. Amy had to leave to 'clear the way' didn't she? Said her time with us was done and there was another that we needed instead."

"You don't think she was leaving because another woman was going to take her place, do you?"

"That is what I think. Didn't she also say you were doomed to having woman come into, and leave your life, basically forever?"

"I was trying to forget that part."

He shook his head and put a hand on Lysanias' shoulder. "Not to worry lad. I'll never let you forget it."

"You're all heart. I suppose putting the two together would mean it was a woman, but that's still not proof."

"Agreed. We're counting on you to get me where I need to be to save you- I mean the day, again. Have a good night!"

*Just you wait, this time I'll be saving you. It has to happen sometime, right?* "See you tomorrow."

For two days the boat sailed, following the coast with a favorable wind. The coast rolled by, and as it was fairly mountainous it was rather boring. Using another spyglass he had made, Lysanias saw airships and skybourne cities, and always scowled at them. Looking the other way he saw boats moving away from them, and pointed them out to Everest.

"Where are they going? Is there something out in that direction?" *I remember them saying any ship that sailed, air or water, past a certain point never made it back. So where are they going?*

"Probably Paradiel. It's an elven controlled island where one of the Heaven gates is."

“Open Heaven gates? Reminds me of home. Wish I had mastered that remote viewing Amy could do, or at least leaving my body. I could have gone over there to see it.” He swung the glass to the west, looking for an island but it must have been too far away as he only saw the horizon. And the ship that seemed to be coming directly for them. “Hey, is that ship coming towards us?”

“What ship? Let me see that!” Everest grabbed the glass and peered through it himself. “Oh great. This glass is probably better than the one they have. I’m going up on the observation post to check it out.”

*Better you than me. Being up in the balloon was bad enough, at least that was mostly calm. This boat is an accident waiting to happen if I go up there. Or is it more accurate to say that I’m an accident waiting to happen if I’m on the boat up there?*

Moments later Everest came down and reported there was a ship heading for them. The sailors got ready, getting out cudgels and blades, and everyone looked tense.

“I guess it’s time to earn our pay,” Don said with a smile. He got his halberd out, not having his sword and shield at the moment. He preferred the polearm anyway, and looked excited.

“We’re not going to have to kill them, are we?” Lysanias asked. “I’ve done enough of that since waking up.” *The elf taken over by the spirit of one of my people, a progenitor. He wanted me dead because I had survived the flood. Then the annunaki possessed by the shadow kin, though I suppose Don finished him off. YM01 got killed because of me. The innocent camp of those half goat people, what did Don call them? The shopkeeper, ran him through myself. That killed the shadow kin along with the innocent man. Now I have to kill pirates, for a bit of metal I would gladly give them because I have so much now? It doesn’t seem right.*

“If they try to kill us, I suggest you do the same,” Everest told him. “Their deaths are their own fault if they come at us with deadly force.” He had his first pair of daggers in his hands, waiting for the ship to get closer. He had pulled these from under his jacket, leaving his second pair in the sheaths at his side. These were the metal ones, the ones made of a more special material had yet to be tested, and weren’t of much use against pirates.

“I suppose.” *Is this really the world you had in mind, Allfather? I’m not supposed to kill, but how do I avoid it?*

The boat got closer and closer, and suddenly they heard a boom and the water in front of the boat geysered up. “Canon,” snarled Don. “A warning shot, or just missed us?”

“Canon?”

“Remember those small guns the wanderers had?” Everest asked. “Or the alchemists, they offered us some guns to shoot the solidified light into possessed people.” Lysanias did, after they had blown the portal room up they had run into some with weapons that shot hot metal out the front. “Scale those up and make it shoot a ball the size of your head. That’s a canon.”

“Great.”

“Only if you’re behind it, rather than in front. Better get ready, it seems we are under attack.”

“See you afterwards,” Don told him, relaxing his concentration. Of course, Lysanias could still see him, but Everest and anyone “normal” wouldn’t be able to.

*Right. Better get out my spirit too, that should make them think twice about attacking us. Two people they can’t perceive making trouble for them. Mountain spirit, I need your help again.*

*I hear you.* Sanding before Lysanias was his mountain spirit, the manifestation of his inner soul. Looking like a small mountain that had come to life, the spirit was an excellent fighter and could do many of the things Lysanias himself could.

The pirate vessel drew closer, but something wasn't right. Lysanias could feel it, a potential arcing through the air as though lightning was about to strike the deck of the ship.

"Something's wrong," he managed before the sound of outrushing air interrupted him. He spun and several figures stood behind them. Two raised glowing swords, a third hovered in the air just behind them.

"Revenge!" shouted the floating figure, and Lysanias felt a force taking hold of him and threw him across the deck, making him go sprawling. This knocked the air out of him and he hit the railing of the ship with his back making him cry out before he crumpled.

"Lad!" shouted Don, looking in his direction.

"We have no quarrel with you," Everest said to the wanderer before him. "We don't have to fight."

*"I think we do,"* they replied, raising their blade. As usual the words of the wanderer weren't exactly heard, but somehow projected into the minds of those nearby. *"Esta sends their regards."*

"Fine." The weapon in Everest's right hand left it, now controlled by his ability to move earth. The wanderer tried to get out of the way but the knife scored, drawing blood.

*"I'll take the dwarf,"* said the other.

"Oh I just bet you will," Don replied, turning his attention to the figure before him.

As Lysanias got to his feet he looked over at the hovering figure who was partially transparent. *That looks like one of the dead bodies from that camp the explosion of P05 destroyed. Is that some kind of ghost? How did it suddenly get here, with two wanderers? With his attention on the figure he didn't notice two shadows slipping under two crewmen that were nearby. I don't want to get thrown like that again, but I have no idea how to deal with something like that. Maybe my spirit can keep it busy?*

To that end, the spirit started forward, straight for the ghostly figure.

The wanderer before Don charged forward, but he simply brought his pole-arm down, holding the wanderer at bay. He then stabbed forward, catching the wanderer's sword arm and slicing through the sleeve.

Everest slashed with the knife again, making the wanderer peddle back to try and avoid the airborne blade. He didn't manage it, the knife scoring and sending more blood splashing to the deck. "There's still time for you to give this up," Everest pleaded. "I don't want to kill you, just let it go!"

*"Never! Any innocent members of my species are now stuck on my world, unable to come here through the portal you all destroyed. You must answer for that."*

The mountain spirit reached the floating figure and it didn't even bother to move as the spirit's fist went completely through it. The spirit sort of turned with a "now what?" look at Lysanias.

"I don't know, figure something out!" he shouted to it. *But what can I do? An arrow is just going to go through it, and if I can't touch it I can't change it. Can't put it in a ward, don't know any attack magic. Maybe Don or Everest can think of something, if I free them up.* He whipped an arrow out of his quiver, sending it flying towards the wanderer Don was fighting. It struck him in the body with the blunt end, and he heard something snap. The wanderer cried out in pain and looked over at Lysanias.

*"You'll pay for that sometime,"* they said, and vanished.

"Thanks lad!" shouted Don.

"Figure out what to do with the-"

"Revenge!" cried the ghost again, bringing his hands together. Lysanias felt the temperature around himself drop and tumbled forward, but his head and left side got caught in the attack. His skin essentially went frostbitten, as somehow the ghost froze the very air around him.

*I miss you, Amy. You would have seen that coming and warned me.*

As Lysanias hadn't thought of anything to do to the ghost, neither had the spirit, and went to help free up Everest. As it turned, one of the crew screamed as blackness overtook his body. The scream was cut off as the shadow engulfed the man, and Lysanias now saw another man about to be swallowed by darkness as well. *Oh no, "we've got shadow kin here!"*

Don took a step. "Don's maneuver!" he screamed, throwing his halberd at the figure that was now engulfed. *He really said it. I don't believe it.* The shadow kin was still not in full control and couldn't make the man inside dodge, so he was impaled on the blade through the chest. "Get me a dagger, now!" he called to Everest, and held a hand out.

The mountain spirit, now behind the wanderer attacking Everest sent two quick jabs at them, staggering them. *"The emperor was right, I should have gotten more practice."* And they too were gone.

"Here it comes!" Everest shouted, and from the sheath at his left the dagger that was there flew out and into Don's waiting hand. The blade on this one was strange, looking as though it was made of a bright light, rather than steel. The one at his right he drew himself, the other ones falling to the deck.

"Got it."

"What about the ghost?" protested Lysanias.

"One thing at a time!"

"Revenge!"

"Don't you know any other-" His sentence was cut off as the ghost pointed, and his extremely flammable spider silk armor burst into flames. The ghost burst into laughter as Lysanias shrieked and starting trying desperately to unbuckle the armor from himself.

"Roll on the ground lad!" shouted Don.

*But the deck is made of wood, some part of Lysanias thought to himself. How is setting the boat on fire going to help?*

The shadow kin, now in control, tore the halberd from the chest of the victim it had taken over and advanced on the now burning Lysanias.

To his credit, Lysanias didn't allow panic to cloud his mind. He simply dropped his sword and grabbed a contain ward from his dispenser, pressing it to the more flame resistant straps on his back that held the armor on. He willed just the armor into the ward, and it vanished. The ghost looked disappointed.

Meanwhile the mountain spirit intercepted the shadow kin possessed person running towards Everest, sword out. The spirit struck out, intending to disarm the man and allow the new plan for dealing with shadow kin to go ahead. But the shadow kin managed to get out of the way, so obviously it could see the spirit.

Don struck out with the dagger, and the shadow kin recoiled from it, seeing it was made of solidified light. Don wasn't very practiced with the blade, and fought with a pole-arm for a reason. He had stumpy arms, and didn't manage to reach the shadow kin.

*Thankfully the alchemists were willing to make more of that stuff, and could make a copy of Everest's daggers with a blade made of the light that seems to disrupt these creature's hold over people. I bet it'll work too, them getting stabbed with it, based on how that one jumped away from the blade. It's nervous about it for some reason.*

The ghost now looked at the fallen blade and smiled, making a crushing motion with one hand. The sword quivered and cracked, nearly bursting apart but the vibration stopped before it did.

*I have got to get rid of this stupid ghost somehow! Another attack like that on the sword and it'll be useless! There's only one thing I can think of, and I didn't want to try it like this. I had hoped we could wound it somehow beforehand.*

The mountain spirit was up again, and stepped up close to the shadow kin, again trying to disarm it. It brought a hand down on the hand of the shadow kin and smacked the blade out of it. Then it slugged the man in the chest. It connected again and the shadow kin staggered back a little.

*Let's see if this works on ghosts.* His spiritual energy lashed out, targeting the ghost. "In the emperor's name..." he began, starting a banishing.

The ghost gave a shout of surprise and vanished.

*Hey, I must be better than I thought!*

Everest now went to stab his dagger into the shadow kin, maneuvering the blade around the mountain spirit. He scored on the shadow kin's left leg, and the shadowy armor pulled away from the blade, becoming a creature behind the man. It was holding its own leg in pain, but not letting go of the man either. They were still connected by a ribbon of shadow.

"Get over here!" Everest called to Lysanias.

*Oh sure. I'm wounded here!*

The shadow kin before Don looked to his companion in shock, probably thinking about how it hadn't believed that would actually work. But it had. Don took advantage of the slip and drove the dagger into the man. Ironically he hit the right leg, and again a shadow kin was driven off someone.

"Got mine too, lad!"

*Great, make me do all the work, why don't you?*

Lysanias staggered over to his sword and grabbed it, thinking it was lucky the shadow kin was fairly near. He stabbed it forward, hoping it hadn't been weakened to the point of shattering, but the resistance as he sliced into the shadow was minimal. He again threw energy into his will, knowing he had a better shot at this with the thing distracted and wounded. "In the name of the emperor, depart this world forever!" he cried, and again spiritual energy lashed out of him. The shadow kin popped like a soap bubble and vanished. *One down, one to go.* It was a simple matter to stagger over to the other one and repeat the procedure, making that one vanish as well.

The sword clattered to the deck of the ship, point first, as Lysanias didn't want to expend the effort to hold it up. The two sailors were screaming and bleeding all over the place, unaware of how they came to be stabbed in the legs. Lysanias was freezing, his chest felt burned, his head was ringing.

"What was that?" Everest demanded, coming over to him. He had his daggers again, all four of them, and was putting the glowing one back in the outer holsters. "Is Don all right? Are you all right?"

"I'll live," he replied weakly. "Don, as usual, is fine. He wasn't even touched." *The smug bastard.* He blinked, trying to clear his head. "Wasn't there something else going on?"

"The pirates are boarding!" someone yelled from the back of the ship.

"That was it," he remembered with a sigh, closing his eyes and wondering how much worse this day was going to get.

3

Brief Meeting

When: After the attack

Where: ???

“Revenge!” cried the poltergeist, looking at the man sitting in the throne.

“I couldn’t be sure if banishing you would be effective or not,” he calmly replied.

“Did you really want me to take the chance? You did well for a first time, and almost destroyed that sword of his. The others... were not as useful as I had hoped.” The man looked over at the two wanderers, their wounds being treated with magic.

*“Your fancy weapons did little to help,”* remarked the one on the left.

*“Yes, we didn’t even get a hit in,”* added the one on the right.

The man on the throne looked thoughtful. “They do seem to have a great deal of fighting experience, and perhaps expected an attack such as that one? Lysanias’ ability to dream and guess the future will work against us. I had hoped the pirate attack would allow you to take them by surprise, but perhaps we should have waited until they boarded? Still, there’s plenty of time. They are seasoned fighters, you are not. You do need to strike with the weapon before any special abilities it has come into play. Keep practicing, and be ready for the next time we can attack them. And next time wear the armor, it was made for a reason.”

“When?” demanded the poltergeist.

“When next they least expect it. Come, watch the show. The pirates may yet finish the man off. You did wound him after all.” The man waved and in the air magic shimmered, a seeming hole opening to show the ship.

“Revenge,” the poltergeist softly intoned.

*You were the one that didn’t give us time to get into the armor,* thought the one on the right. *You just showed us where they were, shoved the sword into our hands, and said to get to it. So how is this our fault?*

## Leaving The Pirates Behind

When: No time has passed

Where: Back at the ship

Lysanias sighed as he applied the healing ward to his arm, and the soothing blue flame started repairing his frozen skin.

“You know,” remarked Everest, “it’s a good thing you have a couple of different ways to heal yourself, Lysanias. You seem to take a disproportionate amount of hits.” He looked the man over and saw burns, frozen skin, his shirt was in tatters from the flame and he had an ugly bruise on his back. “You need to learn how to dodge or something.”

*I wonder. My mother had practiced seeing the future, could she have known in some way that I would be hurt a lot in the future? That’s why she insisted I learn the healing ward? But to see as far ahead as she did, thousands of years in the future? Is that possible?* “Tell me about it,” he replied, pulling another one out for his leg. “I mean you use tiny daggers, and sure you can float them around now but did you ever get hit as much as I do?”

“Not that I can recall. Of course the things I fought against were mostly underground creatures that for the most part aren’t very bright.”

“Is he calling me stupid?” Don asked, walking over with his halberd in hand again.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so what? You think underground creatures are pretty bright?” Everest asked, confused.

“I was talking to Don. Would you become visible to him so I don’t look- never mind, let’s see about this pirate nonsense.”

The “pirate nonsense” was a two pronged attack by the other ship. There were no more cannon shots by the pirate vessel but the cargo ship had turned to try and get away from them. This let the lighter, faster ship full of pirates come along side. Ropes with hooks on them had been thrown, trying to grab onto the railing and pull the two together while other pirates in smaller boats climbed ropes at the back of the ship. These were just touching down on the deck and got rushed by the sailors, swords flashing in the sun on both sides.

“Let’s take care of the ropes at the side,” Lysanias decided, not wanting to get in the way of the fights already going on.

“Watch out lad, they’ll have guns to try and keep us from doing just that!”

“Good thing I have something to hide behind.” The mountain spirit came forward, walking before Lysanias and absorbing any gunfire from the pirates ready to leap the railing. The ropes were taut, the spirit couldn’t get them loose because it hardly had any more strength than Lysanias did at this point. So he simply reached around the spirit, touched the rope, and willed it to sever. This caused the pirate at the other end who was hauling the ship together to go flying. He had to repeat this four more times, but it was already too late. Nearly a dozen men now jumped to the cargo ship as they were close enough together.

“Drop your sword!” one of them commanded, pointing his gun at Lysanias.

He peeked out from behind the mountain spirit, which probably looked quite comical to the pirates but honestly he couldn’t see the man otherwise. “No.”

“No?” The pirate seemed quite startled. “There’s a dozen of us here, you think you can fight us all? Alone?”

“There’s going to be one less in a second.”

“You don’t look like a wizard. How are you going to do anything before we shoot you full of holes?”

*What, just because I'm not wearing a robe and wizard's hat I can't do magic? Not too bright, these fellows.* "I'm not going to do anything."

That's when Don grabbed one of the men and shoved him back over the edge of the railing. He screamed and plunked into the water below.

"See?"

"Huh?" They all turned to see their fellow missing.

"Like I said. Honestly, you think I'm calmly standing here because I've lost my mind? You can't hurt me, and if you try, you'll all be going over the edge."

"We'll see about that! Shoot him!" A dozen guns went off, slamming into the spirit who didn't feel them in the least. The men all looked down at their guns in confusion.

"Care to try that again?"

"Forget the guns. Get him!" With a cry the pirates surged forward, another giving a cry of surprise as he found himself being thrown off the edge to join his companion in the ocean. The others didn't notice this time, they were trying to figure out why they couldn't get to Lysanias. With the spirit in the way they perceived the way as open, but at the same time couldn't reach him. It was punching and kicking them, so they knew something was happening, just not what. Don was having fun tossing them around too, and Everest's daggers came spinning out of where he was crouched down behind a box to harass them as well.

Finally it was down to only three, the others having fled or been tossed over the side. They had their swords ready, and were backed up against the railing.

"You're not doing magic, I don't see the circles. How are you doing all this?"

"I'm not doing anything," Lysanias assured them. "I'm just standing here, just as I said."

"He must be a demon!" said the one on the left.

"Why would you assume that? I could just as easily be an angel, couldn't I?"

Lysanias was somewhat insulted, being compared to a wicked soul reborn as some unholy creature. He didn't really know what the typical demon looked like, having never seen one, but he felt they probably wouldn't look human. Some angels did, he had seen them, at least thousands of years ago but they couldn't have changed much. *In fact given the variety of shapes angels took, I should probably expect demons to be similarly diverse.*

"Yeah, that's racist," said the one on the right.

"You know what, I'm just going to throw myself over the side," announced the one on the left. "I'm out." He jumped, landing in the water below with a splash and swimming towards the pirate vessel, now some distance away because the two ships were no longer connected by ropes.

"And how about you gentlemen?" Lysanias asked, looking at the two that were left. "Jump or be pushed?"

But Don didn't give them a chance to decide, simply setting his halberd across the chest of the two men and shoving them both back at once. They tumbled over the railing and that was that.

"I am so glad I didn't have this crystal taken out of my back," Don announced, thumping his halberd down on the deck. "That was fun."

"Come on, let's go see if the others need help."

The group made their way to the back of the ship and repeated their performance of throwing pirates off the ship. Lysanias tended to the wounded, closing up gashes himself if they didn't look too bad, and handing out wards for those that did. With that done he looked over to see the ship was still pacing them.

"Probably trying to work out another way to get our cargo," said the captain, standing there watching them. "Just dumping them overboard isn't going to stop them. They'll just swim back and get rescued. We have to take care of them."

"If by 'take care of' you mean kill, forget it," Lysanias told him. "I won't just slaughter those men. They couldn't even touch me, what kind of man would I be if I did?"

"Well said, lad."

"The sentiment is fine, but really, what are we going to do about them?" asked Everest.

"How about burning their sail?" Lysanias asked. "That big one in the middle? They wouldn't be stuck out here, would they?"

"Their other sails would get them to a port eventually," the captain told them. "But how are you going to do that from so far away?"

"I have an idea." He got his trunk out and rummaged through it, grabbing out a vial of incendiary ether. Then he reshaped one of his stone "arrows" to have a ring at the back, which he set the small vial of liquid into. Then it was a simple matter to let the arrow fly, puncturing the sail and smashing the thin glass as it went through. The sail caught fire immediately and the ship slowed as the pirates tried to get it down to save as much of it as they could. With their attention on that the cargo ship sped onward, leaving them behind.

"I guess you've earned your pay," admitted the captain. "And thanks for healing my men. I take it I owe you a lot of money now?"

He shook his head. "I don't hold with the guild's policy of charging outrageous fees. A bottle of ink and some loose paper if you have any, so I can replace the wards I used. That would be fine."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"Okay, it's your neck on the line if the guild finds out. I'll see what I can do. Thanks again." He walked away.

Lysanias slumped onto the railing of the ship, watching the pirate vessel get smaller and smaller. "That was exhausting. Thank you, mountain spirit, I think the danger has passed." It bowed and vanished.

"Let's talk about that whole attack," Everest suggested. "There were wanderers, and shadow kin, but what was that ghost thing?"

"Some angry spirit from the camp?" Lysanias guessed. "The better question is how did they all get here, and why were they working together now?"

"Plus attacking right before the pirates?" Don put in. "You think someone is watching us somehow? Deliberately attacking us when our attention might have been divided?"

"Who? Wanderers can teleport but from what Esta said, onto a moving ship? He said not to teleport onto anything that was moving. If I didn't want to die, anyway. I can see why they would be mad at us, but to join with shadow kin, the enemies they came here to escape? It doesn't make sense."

"I could see them hiring someone to get them here, but you're right," agreed Everest. "Working together? And with a ghost?"

"My mountain spirit couldn't touch it. I'm just glad that banishing attempt scared it off."

"If that's even what happened. They can't really teleport. Not that I know of."

"And you would know," Don teased him.

"I would. I've read about ghosts!"

"Of course you have. At least the daggers made of light worked."

"One small bright spot, forgive me for not seeming more cheerful," Lysanias sighed. "It worked because they weren't expecting it. They'll stay away next time. We know they can project dark energy as an attack." He touched his neck.

"No others would know. We killed both, right?" Everest asked. "Or banished them or whatever you did. They won't exactly report back."

"But if someone is watching us somehow, they would know," Don replied. "Those wanderers didn't show up at that exact moment by accident. They must have been sent. We have to assume that if someone could watch us to know when to send those wanderers, they watched the fight to see what we would do."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"So what's the plan?" Everest asked.

Lysanias shook his head. "I don't know. I hate to banish that ghost in case it goes to the demon world. Shadow kin presumably go back to their home, according to Esta. So where would a ghost go?" The others had no answer. "There's no other way to fight it, though. At least that I know of at the moment. I screwed up and P05 exploded, that's what created that ghost. I have to somehow atone for that, so it can move on. I won't compound my own guilt by sending it to the demon world if that isn't where it should go."

"We can ask around at the guild building," Don suggested. "See what they suggest."

"As long as it doesn't attack us again before then," Everest countered. "But wouldn't killing it be worse? Then it wouldn't migrate at all, how is that better?"

But neither had an answer to that question.

"Maybe I can ask who sent them all here. Asking how to defeat a ghost would be a bit much, but a name is only a few words. It would work. If we find that person and get their story, maybe we can convince them to, you know, not send it anymore? Then it wouldn't be able to find and attack us, at least."

"Go for the source, sounds good, lad. We'll give you a shake if we need you in the meantime."

Half an hour later, Lysanias opened his eyes. "It didn't work."

"What happened?" asked Everest.

"I asked three different ways, but I just got the sense that the universe didn't know."

"Could this person be behind some kind of barrier that prevents gathering information at a distance?" Don asked.

"Such things exist," Everest informed them. "Naturally someone wanting to stay hidden would make sure such a thing was in place."

"So we've got nothing. I'd ask why they attacked us, but the ghost was pretty clear. 'Revenge' was all it would say. But to go to such lengths..." He trailed off.

"The wanderers might be really mad at us, we did basically strand anyone still alive in their world," Everest suggested.

"But how did they even get together?" Don wondered. "Did the wanderers ask some wizard to do a spell to tell them anyone else that had a grudge against us and where to find them? And then make some deal with the shadow kin? I mean they're stuck here together now, so both would hate us. Their invasion plan was disrupted by us, after all."

"The enemy of my enemy, eh?" Everest figured.

"Exactly. Attack us together instead of apart and have a better chance at killing us."

"And trying to capture one and ask them is impossible. They got wounded and vanish. Being able to teleport on their own means we would never hold one!"

*Not without a ward to prevent it, anyway.*

"So for the moment just get back to civilization as quickly as possible, and hope that discourages further attacks?"

"Unless Lysanias has some brilliant plan." Both looked over at him.

"Not at the moment. I'll think about it though. We're still, what, four days out?"

"Probably. I'll be around if you need me, just give a yell," Don told him.

“Same for me,” Everest announced, going in the opposite direction. They both were looking out over the water, worried looks on their faces.

*Making sure no other ships are coming probably. For my part, I need a ward or two I can slap on before a fight. Something that will keep me from getting hurt, maybe? Can't use unseen, that only helps against people like the pirates. I have my spirit for that. The looks on those guys' faces when their guns hit "empty air!" Can't become invulnerable like my spirit is either. Throwing me wouldn't have hurt, but I bet that ice still would have. The fire not so much- my armor!* Lysanias got out the ward that had his armor in it and released it. Out tumbled a pile of ashes, which quickly blew away in the wind. *Great, so much for that. Maybe some mystical armor? Ugh, have to repair my shirt once I'm not feeling so drained. Obviously the other two can take care of themselves, they didn't get a scratch. It's just me... Could I, specifically, be the target? No, those wanderers attacked the others, don't flatter yourself. The world doesn't revolve around you. They're just better than you are, that's all.*

Lysanias sat in thought the rest of the day, then got to work replacing the wards he had used that evening. That night he dreamed no other useful information about the person who was this spark of light, and the next day got to work on a new ward. He had settled on a supernatural armor, and sticking one on himself caused blows to be deflected. He made several, putting some in his dispenser and giving one to Don and Everest.

“And you didn't accidentally confuse this with a contain ward?” Everest asked, looking at it suspiciously.

“I just sat here and made it. I think I would know if I was looking at the page for the contain ward instead of the new entry I just made for the armor one.”

“How am I going to carry this without it getting all crumpled up and dirty? I mean it's just paper.”

“I stuck the one with my halberd to the inside of my shield,” Don told him. “I'll probably stick this one next to it.”

“That doesn't help me very much, does it?”

“Find someplace to stick it, can't be that hard.”

“I'll show you were you can stick it!”

“If you would prefer I carry it, I don't mind.” Lysanias held his hand out. “It's not worth fighting over.”

“I hate to ruin it by accident,” he admitted, handing it back. “Just slap it on me if something else happens.”

*Sure, I'll just stop defending myself in the beginning of a combat to take care of your needs.* “I'll be sure to do that.” He stuck it in the dispenser.

“That's settled then!”

The last night of their travel by boat Lysanias had the dream about the spark of light falling to the ground again, but this time the dream went on. He was standing next to a woman with short, black hair, who looked at him exasperated. “I can't do this all on my own,” she protested, sweeping a hand out to indicate the hordes of skeletons baring down on them. “By the way, you wanted an ale, right?” She lifted a tray, and on it was a mug.

Lysanias awoke, knowing beyond doubt who he had just seen in his dream. “It's the woman who served us,” he said aloud, despite being alone in his room. “The one Xerxes annoyed by moving tables around. He asked her about the skybourne too, didn't he? But her hair was different.” He blinked, looking around the room. *Who am I talking to?* He grabbed his book and made some notes about the woman he had seen. She was fairly young, but then so was everyone from a certain point of view. Short, black hair. Green eyes. Dressed in rough clothes, apron, carrying a serving tray. Was only slightly shorter than he was, at least in the dream. He hadn't paid enough attention when she was walking around at the inn. *At least, I'm fairly sure that's who that is. But*

*why would she have changed her hair like that? Well, what do I know about girls, maybe they do that sort of thing all the time? One way to find out.*

Sitting up in bed he spent the ten minutes patiently waiting for the universe to answer his question of “Where is the black haired woman I just saw in my dream.” He concentrated on her face, seeking the answer to her location. He expected to get back “Farborough” but instead was shocked to get back “Everwatch.”

*Maybe it's not the same woman? Still, we have our next destination, and not a moment too soon.*

## A Lot of Hot Air

Where: Deck of the cargo ship

When: Morning of the arrival at Dvergerforge

“She’s where?” asked Everest.

“She’s a what?” asked Don.

The two looked at each other.

“She’s a what?” asked Everest.

“She’s where?” asked Don.

The two looked at each other again.

“Do you two come up with these bits beforehand?” Lysanias asked, resisting the urge to cover his eyes. “She’s a waitress and she’s in Everwatch.”

“You’re sure it’s the same person?” Everest asked.

“Apart from the hair being different, yes. At least, I think so. We only saw her for a moment. But somehow I think she is.”

“Lad, how is a waitress from an inn going to help us?”

“Could she just have a sister or something?” Everest mused quietly.

“How did a nature spirit from an underground spring help us? By being a seer. If this woman knows something about what my dream means, or can show me how skybourne magic is used, doesn’t you think that would be helpful?”

“But Everwatch? That’s on the other coast, and inside another kingdom!” Everest protested. “Why would she have gone there?”

“How should I know? All I know is the dream showed me her face, and she offered me ale on a tray. When I asked the universe where that woman was, I got back Everwatch. When we find her, we can ask her.”

“Another long trip,” Don mused, stroking his beard. “Very long. Wouldn’t mind seeing the mines though, may not have another chance.” He barked a laugh. “Didn’t think we would be taking a tour of the entire realm when we found you, lad. We just might though, this keeps up. I’m not complaining, mind you.”

“Mines?”

“A lot of the silver originally used to make moon coins came from there,” Everest explained. “But that was a long time ago. I’m not sure where the majority of silver comes from at this point.”

“Empty silver mines? You just want to visit them to make sure no silver got missed,” Lysanias said slyly. “I remember you saying you could smell valuable ore, that’s how you found me. The metal in my sword.”

“That’s right lad. On both counts!” He laughed. “But to actually stand in the silver mines... That would be worth making the trip all on its own.”

“That aside, getting there is somewhat problematic. From what I recall of maps I’ve seen, Everwatch is directly east of Farborough. So at least getting back there will cut our time in half. But can you teleport that far?”

“With the help of the spirits and a ley line or four, sure. We should be getting back to places they’re more plentiful. I mean look at all that green!” He indicated the coast, south of them was forest while north of them was mountains. They had sailed into a narrow channel and were carefully making their way east to the base of the mountains, where they would be met by the dwarves that worked in Dvergerforge.

“We’ll have to go through the pass, right?” Don asked.

“Silverflame pass, that’s right. Only way in and out of Silveria. Unless you want to sail across the silver sea, or go by airship. But the pass through the mountains brings you fairly close to Everwatch. At least there will be some roads between all this, it won’t be just forest. I have one other idea on how to get there, but let me think about it a bit more.”

"That's fine. They must have had a lot of silver," remarked Lysanias. "Silver sea? Silverflame pass? Silveria? Everything has that name! Those mines must have been something!"

"They were pretty big on it, there," admitted Don. "I can only imagine what the mines were like. That aside, we're talking about going there to look for one inn worker in the whole city. Do you know how big Everwatch is?"

"Oh, come on, Don. We can narrow it down once we get there. I got the name of the town, didn't I? I can just ask the name of the inn. Heck, I might dream of it before we get there, now that I know."

"I suppose."

That evening the ship pulled into the harbor and scores of dwarves swarmed it to unload the metal. They were astonished by how much there was, and the captain wasted no time in telling the tale of how the three heroes had repulsed a pirate attack. The dwarves were quite thankful and wouldn't take no for an answer, insisting they at least spend the night and attend a feast in their honor.

"Look, it's late, we might as well sleep here," Don rationalized. "You'll want to teleport in the morning when you're fresh, anyway."

"It's fine, you don't have to convince me," Lysanias told him. "We'll be making a journey of weeks in a few minutes instead, we can afford to stop here for the night."

As they were led inside and through the tunnels he tried to hang back, somewhat intimidated by all these people despite the fact he towered over everyone there. They wouldn't have it, dwarves kept coming to thank him for saving the metal. Many remarked on how good his command of the dwarven language was, making him remember that, *oh yes, language is a thing, isn't it? As I'm not making translation wards for Amy every day, I forgot about it.* The leader of the group, a dwarf named Dar Thavader, personally gave them a tour of the forge area. It turned out they used the heat from a semi-active volcano for their forging, which Don was impressed by.

"Isn't that somewhat dangerous?" Lysanias asked, looking down at the lava below them.

"We've been here a long time," Dar explained. "We know the moods of this place. Plus our wizards have put various measures in place. It's perfectly safe. Look, some of that stuff you brought is already being melted down." He pointed, and below a great metal cauldron full of scraps was being lowered on massive chains. "My people have been awaiting the latest shipment. It's like the earth no longer blesses with the bounty we have come to expect. Very disheartening, for a dwarf."

*And it could lead to wars, couldn't it? As more places are mined out, places that are not will have their demand grow. A good cause for invasion. Wonder if I could seek out new sources of metal to mine. A wizard wouldn't bother unless they were paid, and it's probably not to the point a mining operation would think to ask one. I wonder...*

"I agree," Everest told him. "I'm in the mining business myself, but the last set of tunnels I walked through was empty."

Dar nodded. "Becoming a theme. But enough of that, tonight we celebrate. Come, I'll show you to your rooms, you can put your packs away." He led them through tunnels, some filled with the sound of hammers, other quiet, and showed them where they could stay. As expected, Don and Everest took a single room, making Dar shrug. "Whatever you want."

The feast that night was boisterous, and Lysanias couldn't imagine how it would have been if he had turned over even more of the metal they had recovered from the dormant war machine. They were melting down the pieces, that much was clear, so there was really no reason to keep the remainder from them.

No reason but one. *If I don't spread it out won't one place simply take a large portion of wealth for itself? That could make trouble if others found out about it and*

*decided to do something about it. No, much better to trickle it out over time, so no one is sure where it all came from.*

The next morning a dwarf led the group out of the tunnels, and again thanked them for guarding the shipment. The boat had already left, presumably to sail up the coast again, and Lysanias concentrated on seeing local sources of spiritual energy he could tap into. They had to walk a short distance but Lysanias found several minor ones that were close enough, and got out two contain wards.

"Here we go again," Everest complained.

"You can wait until I call the spirit," he suggested. He looked around, and there was enough dead wood around to make a small fire, which they did. He called upon the spirit for a few moments, put out the fire, and then put the two inside the ward. With that done he gathered the energy from the ley lines into himself, then drew upon his own inner reserves. Picturing the corner of the basement that the alchemists had cleared and promised to keep clear (Rick had a pained expression on his face as he had done this) so he would have someplace to teleport into, he threw as much energy as he could into his will and shifted.

"My word!" Abigale said, looking over at the noise Lysanias' teleport had created. She was a minotaur, standing twice as tall as Lysanias, and made excellent cookies. *They were the only cookies I've ever had, but they were delicious.* "Hey, everyone, Lysanias is back!"

He opened his eyes and smiled, looking around the familiar lab. *Excellent. It only took a few minutes of preparation and most of my spiritual reserves, but I made it.*

"Welcome back!" Rick greeted him, the apprentice Elves Presley waving to him from the workbench where he was watching the current mixtures. Both of them were human, wearing standard "wizard" robes despite not being magical in the least. "I hope you had a successful trip?"

"I did, thank you. Abigale, nice to see you again."

"And you. We missed you around here, you know?"

"I'll be on my way again soon, this is just a stop on the way. I did bring you some goodies, that's the main reason I came. Let me get my friends out first though, Everest does not like traveling by ward." He released his friends, who blinked against the globes of light illuminating the basement of the mage's guild building.

They too were greeted, and Lysanias started getting more wards out. "I have plenty of metal to give you, simply as raw material should you need it. Plus all the parts of the war machine I felt might be interesting. I think I got what P05 would have called the "mainframe" as well, you can look it over. There were all kinds of wires and such into a box, which I think would be about right for the 'brain' of the machine."

"Splendid. Where to put this stuff..." He looked the lab over, which was already basically overflowing with junk they had picked up over the years. Hundreds of years, in the case of Rick. As long as he carried the stone currently in his pouch, he didn't age, so he had been alive and working for the guild as long as he could remember. "Maybe we could clear this area..."

"I told you we should have started cleaning this place out!" Abigale admonished him.

"Nothing stopping you," he retorted.

"I see how it is."

The group got to work, and Lysanias dumped out everything he was giving them. "Oh, and I took those measurements you wanted for the rail system. They should be here someplace. The town was kind enough to 'lend' me one of their carts that was rusting out, and a piece of track. Hopefully you can see how the wheels work, duplicate

that, and fix the cart. I'll have to teleport it back at some point, but they were fine with waiting. If you can do it, they want a few more carts and are willing to pay."

"I'm more interested in copying the whole system and seeing where it could be used in the city," Rick admitted.

"Sounds like you're proving the field agent concept works," Abigale praised him, shifting a huge pile of metal like it was nothing. "Metal that isn't all rusted out? New ideas from far away towns? What a concept." She glanced over at the far wall where rotted metal vehicles sat, waiting to one day be looked at.

"Don't get used to it," Lysanias told her with a shake of his head. "This 'metal' stuff could soon be in fairly short supply."

"Only half the forges in Dvergerforge were active," Don agreed sadly. "And that was with the metal we brought. I had a look around before you got up, Lysanias. It's not looking good."

"One problem at a time," cautioned Everest. "Our current problem is getting to Everwatch."

"Everwatch? Is Silveria?" asked Rick. "That'll be a bit of a walk."

"Ah, but what if we didn't walk at all?" he asked with a raised finger.

"Too far to swim. You don't want to slog through marsh do you? Any other water route takes you so far out of the way you might as well go through the pass."

"Actually, I was wondering if you three, and Lysanias, wanted a bit of a challenge. See, I have something in mind and it'll probably take all of us, even you Don, we'll need your metalworking experience."

"What did you have in mind?" Abigale asked, clearly curious.

"Yeah, you said that before," Don added suspiciously. "What are you cooking up?"

"Let's fly there. I want to build our own airship!"

The people in the lab stared at him for a moment, the alchemists like he had gone crazy.

"You need magic, and lots of it, to make an airship," protested Rick at last.

"Not so! Lysanias, tell these good people what we saw above the town where we emerged with Yttrius."

"A spotter balloon. Wait, are you saying we should make something like that?"

"Not something like that, but exactly that. A bit grander in scale so it can have a larger basket. We'd be stuck in it for hours at a time, after all."

"Spotter balloon?" asked Rick.

"I believe you could do it. Alchemy can make a fire that never goes out, same as magic, right?"

"That's true."

"And the balloon is just a big, mostly airtight bag with a basket under it. There's no reason we couldn't make one and sail the open skies!"

"There's one reason," grumped Don. "How would we steer the thing? That balloon would have just floated wherever it wanted on the wind!"

"That's the best part, alchemy solves that problem too. Show them your drill arrows, Lysanias."

Lysanias pulled a red colored arrow from his quiver and showed them. "I put this groove into the arrow, then I thought if I made it spin with my ability to animate something before I threw it, it would hit and then do further damage. Given how agonizing that would be, whoever I used it on would have to be pretty bad. So I've not tested it."

"I should hope not," agreed Rick. "Imagine, making something like that!"

"Now, Rick," Abigale gently chastised, "you don't know what it's like out there. Our field agent needs to defend himself. But moving a whole balloon with animation? I don't know..."

“Wouldn’t work for long anyway,” Elves put in from the other table. “Animation doesn’t last very long. You would have to do it multiple times an hour.”

“And is Lysanias good enough to animate a whole balloon?” wondered Rick.

“He doesn’t have to,” explained Everest. “Just the cloth part. It wouldn’t be that heavy, would it?”

“Hummm, depends on what we make it out of, I suppose.”

“The animation problem isn’t insurmountable though,” Lysanias mused. “I can see two ways around it. A ward that duplicates the ability, or a ward that maintains the last power put on an object.”

“There’s another way,” Don realized. “Fabricating it. When I was getting that lesson on how to make the spell lens for Everest, the guy was looking through his books. I happen to catch a section on making an object perform a task it was meant for on its own. And this balloon’s task will be flying us around.”

“There you are, then!” Everest agreed, smiling broadly. “What do you say? Shall we basically buy burlap to build a beautiful balloon?”

Everyone looked at everybody else. “We know the theory works, the spotter balloon worked at Farpoint,” Lysanias admitted.

“Worst case, it isn’t fast enough or the fabrication doesn’t work the way we want, we sell it to the town as a spotter balloon here.”

“And money for supplies isn’t an issue, I’m sure smelters around here will be just as happy to buy some of the metal we collected. Metal being far more expensive than cloth, I’m sure we can afford a lot of cloth selling only a small amount of the metal I still have.”

“You really want to fly?” Don asked him.

“I want to see if it would work!” Everest clarified. “If we could build one that actually flies and is useful. Of course, having a balloon we can sail around in wouldn’t hurt.”

“I suppose. Who knows where we’ll have to go after finding Lysanias’ latest girlfriend. And I’m sure the balloon will impress her to no end.”

“Latest girlfriend?” Rick asked.

“Never mind!”

And so the group got busy. Don went back to being tutored by the fabrication expert at the guild, learning to make objects that could move themselves. It was fairly simple, hardly justifying the cost of the tutoring, so as part of the class the master promised to critique Don’s other magically related skills and offer any pointers he could. When his tutoring was done he had a better sense of feeling out magic, reading magical script, and imbuing magic into things as well as fabricating.

Everest sold the metal and had the fabric delivered, then went looking for basket making material and rope that would be light and strong enough.

The alchemists got busy joining the material together, making an egg shape that the hot air would flow into, and then created the basket out of the wood Everest found. Creating the fire was not a problem, they just bought a barrel of oil, lit it on fire, and sprinkled it with the powders needed to keep it burning forever. Naturally they had turned the bottom part to stone so Everest could move it without anyone having to touch it, and Don finally provided the drawings for the “engine” where the barrel would sit in. It was a two pipe system, so when more lift was needed a damper could be turned to allow more heat into the balloon. When less was needed, the damper could be closed and the heat would flow out a different pipe and escape harmlessly. With the right setting it could simply sit in the ground, still inflated, but not go anywhere.

“And when I’m done with the fabrication,” Don told them, “it will only move as we command it anyway. I just didn’t want the cloth to catch on fire, hence the other heat pipe.”

Meanwhile Everest had looked over the magic the group had copied from the unicorn, and decided to learn the spell that could make someone better at doing something. He figured this would help Don fabricate the balloon, so he practiced the spell and magic in general. He also looked into direct combat magic, which was by guild policy unfortunately not available for sale or trade. Not to non-members, anyway. On one hand Lysanias knew where they were coming from, giving any random mage the magic to destroy a house or kill someone at a distance probably wasn't a good idea. But on the other they had a ghost to deal with. Everest did come back with some good news, after he explained to the wizard overseeing the publicly accessible trade floor what he wanted the attack magic for; Iron.

"It turns out, iron can somewhat hurt ghosts!" he announced. "Even ones we normally can't touch. Somehow iron can touch them, at least enough to help drive them off. It has to be pure iron, but that's not a problem for a bunch of alchemists, is it?"

So Lysanias changed all the metal tips of his stone arrow-spears (he still wasn't sure what exactly to call them) to pure iron, and felt at least a little more prepared for the ghost's eventual return. Everest got one of his normal daggers turned into iron, but Don wasn't willing to have his sword or halberd changed from the special metal it already was back to something so mundane.

"Instead, I'll learn this spell I got from the unicorn. It can help you strike in combat more effectively. If we run into the ghost again I'll support you two, how does that sound?"

When the time came to fabricate the balloon Lysanias called upon the spirit of the dragonfly while near the fire, giving the extra help to Don. Everest used the new spell, further enhancing his skill. Lysanias of course had to continue putting the spirit's blessing on every hour or so, depending on how long he chanted for, but finally the mini-airship was complete.

The test was a success, the balloon could be commanded to fly forward or turn, and made a pass about the city making many stop and point at the strange shape in the sky. Lysanias figured it probably couldn't go much faster than a walk, but this allowed the group to bypass pesky things like mountains or forests. The weeks of work it had taken had paid off, and he had made plenty of every ward he knew how to make in the meantime. Standing next to the newly created balloon he said his goodbyes to the alchemists.

"We're starting another, so figure on seeing at least one when you come back," Rick told him. "Any wizard can fabricate it, and the town has expressed interest in having a few sentinel airships flying about the city."

"We did good, didn't we?" he admitted. "The limiting factor was us. If the fabric could be sewn together instead of joined like we did, it wouldn't take so much energy. Even the four of us could only do so much in a day."

"Hate to have a seam burst while in the air," Rick admitted. "But they must have developed something strong enough. We'll see. We have the time and energy, may as well work for the money. The wizard's guild is already salivating and debating how much to charge for the thing."

"Make sure you get your cut!" Lysanias laughed. "I'll be seeing you soon!"

"Stay safe," Abigale told him.

"Bring back another cute girl!" Elves told him. Rick smacked him in the back of the head.

"And away we go!" Don said, turning the heat to full and making the balloon rise.

They were on their way to Everwatch.

## Balloon Fight

When: Nine days later

Where: Pyre/Silveria border high in the air

The best thing about flying, Lysanias discovered, was *everything about flying*. For one thing it gave them eight more hours of traveling per day because they didn't have to stop and rest. Don would have insisted on a guard rotation anyway so as long as someone was awake to keep the balloon on track, the other two could stretch out in the basket and get some sleep. Luckily they had planned for this, and made the basket long enough even he could comfortably lay down. It wasn't very wide, but it could sleep two people when two of them were as short as Don and Everest were.

Another thing he discovered he liked about air travel was it didn't tire him out like walking would have. Especially over the kind of terrain they were lazily sailing over, like forests and mountains. Thirdly the view was incredible, and gave the group a sense of how the roads, towns, villages, and wilderness below all fit together.

"Wish I had that padform Yttrius was always taking pictures with," Don lamented. "Think of the money we could make selling this view to mapmakers! Heck, they could just trace a picture, or really just print it out! What happened to that picture she gave us of all three of us making fools of ourselves?"

"I've got mine somewhere. Didn't you give me yours to hold onto?" Lysanias asked him. Don looked thoughtful.

"Hey Lysanias? Get out your book of notes for a second, will you?" Everest asked.

"Sure." He handed it over.

"Thanks." He took out a pencil and made a note. "Note to self, when threat of skybourne floating death is over, charge mapmakers a sack of silver to draw maps while in balloon." He snapped the book shut. "Thanks." He went back to the book he was reading, something the alchemists had loaned him that he hadn't read yet. Don just snorted whenever he pulled it out, reminding him that nothing worthwhile came out of books, but Everest seemed enthralled by it and kept going back to it as the kilometers lazily rolled under them.

While there was no big black line on the ground to show when they crossed over into territory claimed by Silveria, that night around sunset they did. The balloon flew on, steadily making progress east while the group got ready for the night. They landed the balloon so they could stretch and take care of a few things, then got back into the air for the "night shift." It wasn't ten minutes after getting back in the air again when five figures came out of the sunset and attacked the balloon. The group might have been taken by surprise, the glare of the sun hiding the four wanderers and one ghost until they were in striking distance. However, seconds before the attack Lysanias felt that same prickly feeling he had felt before the first attack, and recognized it this time.

"We're going to be attacked again!" he called, readying his new armor ward by slapping one on himself and Everest. With a nod of thanks Everest drew his normal daggers and Don took up his halberd.

"Can we land again?" he asked, looking around to see where the attack was coming from.

"Not at the speed we move at. Look!" Lysanias pointed and the figures came into view, flying without apparent support. "We're going to have to fight from the basket."

"Marvelous," Everest muttered, his daggers floating in the air as he released them. "This is going to be fun."

"I'll keep them off you and augment you when I can," Don told them.

"Here they come!" Lysanias got out an arrow-spear and held it ready, waiting for the figures to get closer. He was going to target the ghost, as he knew what it could do.

“Successful strike!” Don cast, getting both his friends with the combat enhancing spell.

With that, the wanderers were in range, but didn’t seem interested in attacking Lysanias and his friends. The one in the lead instead went swung left, going for the rope holding the basket up and slashing at it with his sword.

“Deflection!” cast Don, desperately hoping to avoid the rope being severed.

The attack smashed right through the swirling light and severed the first rope, making the basket rock a bit.

*Oh no, they’re targeting the ropes! We’ve only got seven left, and if they get all of them on one side we’ll be dumped out!*

Two more wanderers peeled off and went to the other side, trying to get the rope on that side too.

“Deflection!” both Don and Everest cast, the magic circles combining. This time it held, the blades bouncing back off the solidified air created by the hastily cast sun spell.

So as to not waste the earlier spell, Lysanias loosed his stone projectile at the ghost who was predictably shouting “revenge” as it got closer. He threw energy into his will as he forced the iron tipped projectile through the air, hoping to nail the ghost in the head and take him out of the fight with one blow. As the right side rope snapped from a telekinetic attack by the ghost he took the arrow-spear directly in the temple and fell out of the sky.

*Yes! It worked! Now we just have to keep the wanderers from cutting the rope and plunging us to our deaths.*

Lysanias didn’t watch the ghost fall, instead turning to see how he could help defend the remaining ropes. If he had, he would have seen the ghost vanishing. Meanwhile, the last wanderer veered left to follow the attack plan of two per side.

“Deflection!” both cast again, and again the magical circles combined to try and defend the next rope. Again, the spell held.

“We can’t keep doing this!” Everest shouted over to the others.

“So think of something!” Don shouted back.

*Have to free them up somehow, but how? There’s four of them and only two casters, and they have to both cast to be effective. Oh no, they’re on both sides now!*

“Deflection!” all three cast, further increasing the effectiveness of the spell. But they were split, trying to defend two ropes against three attackers. Amazingly, the combined spell once again held against the onslaught.

Everest saw an opening and whirled his dagger out at the one just a step behind the others, forcing them back and scoring a hit on their left side.

*Wait a second, I think I have an idea. Wards don’t care what they’re attached to, right? They just activate.* He pulled out as many of the new armor wards as he could, quickly taking one in his other hand and sticking them to the front of the basket as far apart as he could reach. The basket shimmered as an energy field sprang up around it, hopefully protecting at least the front part of the basket, where the attack was going on. *And I’ll put some on the back part too, that should provide some nice defense. Should have done that the first day, even before we left. Stupid, as usual.*

“Deflection,” cried the other two, again hoping to ward off the wanderers. They had to cast one more time before Lysanias, nearly tripping in his haste to reach the back of the basket now that it was unbalanced, set two more wards to strengthen the armor around the ship.

“Dive them off,” he cried, “don’t worry about defense.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing!” Everest told him, bringing his knife back into action from where he had just been holding it in the air.

*Yeah, so do I!*

The wanderers were slightly more cautious this time, expecting some kind of trick, and slashed at the ropes they were nearest. Lysanias winced, expecting to be yanked out of the basket and find himself plummeting to the earth. But the strikes

rebounded off the faint, shimmering energy that sprang up to meet them, and he relaxed a little.

“Successful strike,” Don cast with a grin. They weren’t out of it yet!

Everest now sent both daggers out against the two before him, the one easily dodging while the other got hit on the leg but didn’t seem to be wounded at all. Lysanias now looked them over, and it seemed they were now all wearing a breastplate and had identical swords. The one that had dodged had almost seemed to blur as they did it, making him wonder if something was wrong with his eyes. *And by the way, how exactly are they flying?*

He didn’t worry about it, simply getting another arrow-spear out and whipping it at the wanderer he had the best shot at, the one closest to him on the right. He aimed for the head again, given he didn’t want to hit the armor. The wanderer saw it coming and dodged, but didn’t manage to get out of the way. The arrow-spear smacked into the wanderer and bounced off, making them look more annoyed than hurt.

*Okay, what? I took that ghost out in one shot and yes, I put a lot of energy into my will but still, that seemed underwhelming.*

“It’s protected somehow,” said one of the wanderers. “We’ll have to take them out directly.”

“I don’t know,” said another hesitantly.

“Remember what they did! Let that guide your blade!” said the third.

“Attack!” said the forth, and both that one and the first one to have spoken zipped to the front of the basket that was hanging down a little. This gave them easier access to the balloon, and they flew so fast they were upon Don and Everest in a flash. Don simply gripped his halberd in two hands again and knocked the oncoming blade away, while Everest drew his daggers in to deflect the blow.

“Yow!” Don exclaimed as the sword bounced away from him. A flash of fire had flared to life where the blade had hit. “Hey, that’s cheating!”

The other two wanderers soared in behind the first two, but couldn’t get past their companions. “If you think that’s cheating, wait until you see this,” said the one to the right. “Doubles.” Suddenly there were five of them hovering there, all looking identical and Lysanias couldn’t tell which the original was.

*Now that they’re here, let’s see what they make of this. Spirit, it seems I must call upon you again. There was no answer. What, does it go to sleep? It’s my soul, how can it not hear me?*

Don now took a swipe at the wanderer before him, who tried to parry the strike. They didn’t manage it, and the head of the halberd smashed past the armor and into the wanderer’s body. They looked down at the weapon now supposedly hurting them. “*That didn’t hurt at all.*”

Everest again blocked an attack, daggers coming back to his hands as they were now fighting in close.

*Spirit of mountain, hear me in my time of need!*

*I hear you.* The spirit appeared between the two wanderers.

*Thank you.*

The wanderer to the right gave a shout of surprise and wildly struck out at the spirit, and it was the spirit’s turn to not give a second of thought to being struck. The sword bounced off and unbalanced the wanderer.

“Ha-ha!” with a cry, Don sliced into the sword arm of the one he had been fighting, taking advantage of the momentary lapse. It bit into the arm, but not very deeply. “You’re cheating too, aren’t you?” he demanded.

*“I’ll never tell.”*

The wanderer to the left now tried their luck, smashing the sword into the spirit who again seemed unconcerned. The fire made Lysanias wince but apparently the rocky skin the spirit had was enough to protect it.

*So glad I got a spirit that was extremely tough.*

The spirit now struck out, trying to disarm each person near it. The one to the right with a punch, the one to the left with a kick. Both weapons went spinning away into the land below.

*"Now who's cheating?"* asked the one.

*"Get out of here, we'll take care of them!"* said the one behind that one.

*"Very well."*

Don and Everest politely waited a second, and the two disarmed wanderers vanished.

*I hope they teleported into the air someplace. We're still moving at a fairly good clip, I wouldn't want them to have just accidentally killed themselves.*

"Now we have the numeric advantage," Everest cautioned them. "Sure you want to do this?"

*"We must try to avenge those that will die on the other side of the portal."*

"Which will change nothing," Lysanias told them.

*"Even so."*

With that, both struck out at the spirit, who again didn't bother to dodge. This proved to be a mistake as at least one of the blades was sharp enough to pierce even rock, and caught the spirit in the left arm. For the first time, Lysanias felt damage through the spirit and found his arm wounded. *Wonderful.*

Everest now took a page from the spirit's book of combat, driving the hilt of his knife towards the hand of the wanderer to try and make them drop the sword. It got knocked out and spun away as well.

*"Are you serious?"* the other asked.

*"He just knocked it out of my hand!"*

*"Ugh, let's just go. But we'll be back,"* they warned, and both vanished.

"Anyone else wiped out? Because I'm wiped out," Don admitted, leaning on his halberd. "I don't know how much more I had in me."

"That's not true!" Lysanias said, somewhat more loudly than was perhaps necessary. "He's a dwarf, he could fight all night with no sleep if he had to. With one hand tied behind his back. We all could! And don't you forget it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, this is two attacks by wanderers, right? Someone must be watching us and sending them after us. I mean, they were wearing armor this time and were flying. Someone is supplying them. If they think we're wiped out, maybe they'll send more immediately until we're dead. How many wanderers were at that portal site?"

Don pondered this. "I guess you're right, I have no idea. Making magical armor and weapons isn't easy. And it takes a long time. Who would have that many magical objects just laying around?"

"That one sword hurt my spirit. Actually, we should stop and look for those swords. They could come in handy."

"I wouldn't mind a magical sword."

"Actually I was thinking I could look into their past, see where they came from. That might give us a clue who is sending these wanderers after us."

"Good idea, lad. I'll get the balloon stopped."

*Thank you spirit, once again you have shown we make a great team. The spirit bowed and vanished. Where I stay back and let you do the bulk of the work. At least the ward idea worked out.*

So the group landed and Lysanias asked the universe how many steps to the west the sword that had cut his spirit had fallen. He was rather surprised to get no answer. He tried again for the other two that had been knocked away from their owners, but again neither produced a result.

"You think they were found already?" Everest asked.

“Given the resources displayed by whoever is doing this, maybe. If they were watching the combat they could have used magic to pluck the swords out of the air the moment they fell.”

“So we’re just wasting our time? I repaired the two cut ropes while we were waiting, by the way,” Don told them. “What did you do to protect them?”

“The new wards. They’ll work just as well on an object as a person. In fact, I’ll use the rest of them, and give me that one I gave you, Don. We’ll cover the balloon in them, at least the underside. That should protect the top part instead of just the basket. Just in case they get the bright idea to slice the top open and just let the hot air out.”

“We would still fall pretty slowly,” Don told him. “The whole thing is fabricated, after all. Separating the ropes would dissolve the enchantment, and we’d fall like a rock. So that strategy was sound. Huh, they must be watching us to know we had a balloon, and to come up with the plan to cut the ropes. Anyway, just cutting the bag up a little? We would still glide down because the magic would be trying to move us up. We would survive it.”

“Better safe than sorry, though. I can always make more wards.”

“Up to you.”

So he stuck more wards onto the basket and underside of the balloon, then the group took off again.

“Really starting to get annoyed with these attacks,” Everest said, now sitting in the basket and sipping some water. “But you have to admit, we did pretty good in defending it. All three of us using that deflection spell? That was wild.”

“Yup, that spell lens I made is sure turning out to be a sound investment,” Don admitted, looking smug. “Glad I learned how to make them, yes indeed.”

“Using the crystals I picked up in the cave,” Lysanias reminded him.

“One of which is still stuck in my back,” Don reminded him.

“Which is giving you a neat ability,” Lysanias reminded him.

“Sure is a nice night,” Everest broke in, looking out at the sky. “Look at that sunset.”

The other two looked over. “It’s almost dark. I don’t see anything particularly sunset related to get excited about,” Don complained.

“You must have missed it. Now, who is taking first watch?”

“I’ll do it,” Lysanias sighed. *Nice redirection, by the way*, he sent into Everest’s brain. He didn’t know if the message was received, but at this distance he felt it probably worked. Everest just looked innocent at him, so that was answer enough. “I think I came out the best in that encounter. I hardly did anything.” *But in exchange I’m not beaten up. Wish I could say it was because of my efforts but they had other ideas in mind. Plus they had to get through my two friends to get to me.*

“Sure, nothing but protect the balloon and have your spirit disarm two wanderers at once.” Don snorted. “That’s hardly worth mentioning.”

He shook his head. “You two get some sleep. I’m sure there will be plenty of attacks tomorrow to keep us on our toes.”

But there wasn’t an attack the next day, or the day after that. Lysanias practiced both his mental skills and calling out his spirit, along with reforming things to remake the arrows he had lost. More questions were asked, like what the name of this person was, and what inn she worked at. His dreams weren’t much help, just more warning imagery about floating islands. He made replacement wards for the armor ones used on the balloon, rising above any storm clouds they saw so they didn’t get wet and fail. The balloon sailed on and finally after another week of non-stop travel he said he saw the ocean in the distance with the glass. Raising the flame and making the balloon float higher he was able to see what was possibly a large city on the coast, and the balloon turned to head straight for it.

The group decided to land some ways away from the gates, then see if the balloon would fit into a contain ward. If it did, all three of them could enter the city and start looking for this possible skybourne. If not, one would stay behind and watch the balloon so it wasn't destroyed by their mysterious foe and any wanderers. Finally, sometime after noon they decided they were close enough and landed. Lysanias had seen that Everwatch was a fairly huge city, and was excited and nervous to see who he would next be meeting on his journey.

*Even if they will ultimately leave me.*

You Only Get One Chance

When: Just after landing

Where: Outside Everwatch

"It's not going to work," protested Everest. "That huge balloon inside your ward? No way."

"Why wouldn't it? If you think about it, there's not much actually to it," reasoned Don. "The cloth is thin, the basket is light. You could roll it all up into something two or three people could carry. I mean the cloth would fit in the basket if it was deflated."

"Uh-" Lysanias held up the ward.

"Just a second," Everest told him, holding up a hand. "But it has to be the current size of the object not the potential size of the object." He was making a sphere shape in the air with his hands.

"How do you figure that?"

"That's just more logical."

"What does logic have to do with it? To fit anything into a slip of paper defies all reason. It's a supernatural effect just like reshaping rock or turning stone into gold. I mean we've been inside those wards, does that make sense? Where were we really, at that time?"

"Don't remind me."

"I could just-" He mimed putting the ward on.

"In a second, lad. You want to make a bet?"

"What are you offering?"

"The standard service."

"What? For a night?" He scoffed. "I guess you don't feel that strongly about it. Or do you think I'm actually right and you don't want to admit it?"

"Fine, for a week then!"

"Now you're talking. A whole week." He looked thoughtful a moment. "I accept!" The two shook hands. "Now you can go ahead," Everest allowed.

"Thank you," Lysanias said icily. He checked the basket, making sure everything had been taken out of it. It was empty so he set the ward against the basket and watched as the entire mini-airship vanished, becoming stored in the piece of paper.

"Ah ha!" Don gloated, then began some kind of victory dance. "Oh yeah, who's the dwarf? I'm the dwarf! You bet against a dwarf you lose! In your face, Everest. A whole week now, remember!"

"Guess I was wrong," he admitted. "It fit."

"That's what he said!" Don stopped his dance and pointed at Everest, who groaned and looked at the heavens. "Come on, let's get to town before sundown." He took off towards the city well, doing a little shuffle step as he walked and whistling a jaunty tune.

"I hesitate to ask, but what is the standard service? Is there a non-standard service? Why would he say it fit? What is it? Where is it fitting into to?"

"Sometimes hesitation is good," Everest replied, picking up his pack. "Let's go."

*You're not going to tell me? Really? Sometimes these two do some weird things.*

"Go and ask them, you need the practice," Don told him as they approached the gate. Lysanias was resisting as Don was trying to push him to the front. As with Farborough the place was surrounded by a large stone wall, and had a thick iron gate that could be secured attached to it. The road they were on led straight through the gate, and a couple of bored looking guards wearing the Silveria colors watched them approach.

"What if I screw it up? They might not let us into town!"

"How can you screw up asking where an inn is?" Everest asked, genuinely curious.

"Knowing me I'd probably trip over a rock and impale myself on their spear."

"What? Even I think that's pretty unlikely. And I just won a bet about unlikely stuff," Don told him.

"I'll just watch the master at work, and maybe I can try it the next time."

"Very well. Good day to you, sirs!" Don called, now close to the gates.

"Good day," the man answered. "How are the roads?"

"Long and dusty!" he replied with a laugh. "Tell me, I've not been here before but the inn The Grinning Trout has been recommended to me. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"The Grinning Trout? Never heard of it."

"Me either," said the other guard. "Wait here." The group stopped as the other guard went through the gate and off to the left.

"Any work for miners?" Everest asked, trying to fill the silence. "Any new mines discovered?"

"Not for a long time," answered the guard. "If you're looking for work as a miner this will be a disappointing place for you."

"Pity. But the old ones are still open for tours, right?"

"I wouldn't call them tours. People wander around them, not that we really recommend that. They can be pretty dangerous. But if you're in the trade you probably already know that."

"Oh, I'm aware. My friends and I thought we might stop in, just to see the place since we were passing by."

"You're not going to find anything," he cautioned. "Other dwarves have tried, believe me."

"Oh, I do," Don admitted. "But sometimes you have to try anyway. Wait, do a lot of people come here to poke around the old tunnels?"

He nodded. "All the time."

"Huh. Probably should have known. We've come all this way, may as well at least check them out."

"Up to you."

"The Grinning Trout you said, right?" the other guard asked, walking back around the wall.

"That's the place!" Everest agreed.

"And it was... recommended to you?"

"What happened? It didn't burn down or anything, did it?"

"Nothing like that. It's just in the, uh, less desirable part of town. Not someplace respectable people like yourselves would want to be seen."

"That insufferable rat bastard!" Don exploded. "I told you that so called 'friend' of yours couldn't be trusted. Probably saw us coming a mile away. The nerve of that guy! How did you say you met him?"

"Hey, this isn't my fault," Everest protested. "I've known him for years. He was probably just joking around. Look, can you recommend a decent place? And what part of the city is 'less desirable' anyway? We'll want to avoid it."

Lysanias was looking back and forth between the two. *What are they going on about? I pulled that name out of thin air, nobody gave it to us. What are they playing at?*

"South quarter," the guard they were talking to replied. "Keep to the north end of town. Try the Whispering Treetop Inn, take the main road here, sixth left, and then forth right. You'll see it."

"Sixth left, fourth right. Got it."

"Thanks," Don told them, walking through the gate.

"See you," Everest said, inclining his head as he went through the gate.

"Thanks for the help," Lysanias managed.

The group walked down the street, taking in the sights. The town wasn't that much different than Farborough, with houses of similar construction and cobblestone roads. The usual assortment of people went by, with the occasional dark skinned elf, dwarf, or other race mixed in.

"What was that about?" hissed Lysanias when they were out of earshot of the guards. "Was that some kind of comedy routine you guys do? I wouldn't have been able to do that. I don't even understand what that was!"

"Misdirection," Everest told him. "Hence the need for practice, I guess."

"But were you talking about me? I gave you the name of the place she works at."

Don shook his head. "That was a fabrication. Look lad, maybe someone is watching us and maybe they aren't. But if anyone asks if a dwarf, a human, and a gnome-

"Walked into a bar," interrupted Everest. "And stop me if you're heard this one."

"As I was saying, the three of us came into town and ask where we went, what will the guards say?"

"They directed us to the whispering tree or whatever."

"Where we are not going. So they'll be looking in the wrong part of town."

"Oh. I'm glad I wasn't the one doing all that, I would have screwed it up for sure. But now how are we going to find the place?"

"Head south and get to the seedy part of town. We can ask around there."

"What does a part of town having a lot of seeds have to do with anything, anyway?"

"You'll see," Everest told him.

As they went south the town became more run down, though Lysanias didn't see any seeds. Houses were in greater need of repair, the stones in the road were uneven, and there were what looked like homeless people begging for money. Don walked over to one, plunking a coin into his cup.

"A thousand blessings upon you," said the beggar.

"Or a bit of information," Don countered. "There a place called the smiling fish or something around here?"

"The Grinning Trout? Three streets over that way." He pointed.

"Thanks." He came back over to the others. "See? Nothing to it."

*I guess.*

"Three streets over that way" not being the most accurate directions it still took the group a few minutes to find the place, but finally they stood in front of a building with a faded sign which could almost be said to be a stylized fish with a big grin. They peered in through the windows.

"Does seem sort of rough," Don admitted.

"Our kind of place!" Everest joked.

"Whatever you do, don't drink the water," Don cautioned.

"If you have the pressing need to talk about how beautiful elves are, or that you once spoke to a unicorn, try and contain it," Everest further cautioned.

"Don't mention those fairies either."

"Try to belch a lot."

"Never say please or thank you. Demand everything and keep your hand on your sword at all times."

"Come on, it can't be as bad as all that." Lysanias yanked the door open, boldly striding inside. The place was smoky, dimly lit, and filthy. To the right was the dining area, where a large animal of some kind was roasting over a fire. Shady looking characters of all kinds looked the newcomers over, and Lysanias nervously looked back at them. The majority were human, but all were scared and tough looking. There were

some other races as well; some kind of giant insect, what looked like a troll, a couple of misshapen figures at a table by themselves, and an ugly looking statue that must be alive, as it slowly turned to look them over as well.

*Okay, maybe it is that bad. Crap, what should I do?* He dropped his hand to his sword. "Back to your cups, dogs!" he nearly managed to almost sound somewhat authoritarian. They all glanced at each other and after some grumbling decided that was acceptable and back to their conversations. *Whew.*

"Ah, looks like the desk is this way," Don said, stepping around him. "Let's ask about our wayward lady, shall we?"

The two followed him, Don rapping on the front of the desk. The humanoid lizard peered over the top of it.

"Can I help you?"

"Looking for a woman by the name of Elita," he said up to them. "Works here, by all accounts?"

"She wanted for something? Any reward?"

"Nothing like that. It's sort of a family matter."

"Whatever." They raised a claw and pointed, and everyone turned. Clearly visible across the way was a waitress, or "wench" in the local lexicon, who had short black hair. She straightened up and met Lysanias' eyes, then froze. *That's her, the girl from my dream. The girl that fell!* She saw the group and the lizard at the desk pointing at her and recognition clearly showed in her eyes. Lysanias lifted a hand to give a friendly wave, thinking even in a place like this, she wouldn't-

"She's getting away!" Everest shouted, as she grabbed the table she was next to and tipped it over. Then she ran for the back, tipping more tables and causing pandemonium on her way through the place.

Lysanias stared at his hand, now with no one to wave to.

"Come on, get after her," Don snarled.

"Wait, is that wise?" he asked, as the assorted patrons of the fine establishment started taking an interest. The ones at the table she had thrown were now visibly upset, and starting to get up. Don didn't stick around to answer, simply took off after her. *I guess it doesn't matter.* They booked it through the place, following the trail of overturned furniture that did slow them down. They burst into the kitchen area, looking around and ignoring the aproned woman shouting about people disturbing her cooking.

"There!" Everest pointed and a door was slamming shut, so they took off in that direction. It opened to an alley behind the building and the three frantically looked around for where she might have run to. The path went both to the right and left, Don shoving Lysanias to the right. "We'll check this way, you go that way."

"Right." He took off, but couldn't help but think *Is this really the right thing to be doing? Maybe I'm thinking of cats, is it cats you shouldn't chase after? Let them come to you? Or is that ducks? Why did she run like that, we didn't mean her any harm. This is so messed up.*

The alley turned into a dead end, three buildings sharing a common space where a bunch of garbage and boxes were stacked up. He made a show of trying all the doors, but in reality was reaching out with his senses. *Yes, she's here all right. Hiding behind the boxes there. I didn't even see her when I went past, how did she... Right, that's the point.* He remained looking at the opposite building but turned his head. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said fairly loudly. "I just wanted to talk. Look, I'm going to take my sword off." He started unbuckling it. *Stupid of me to walk into the place with it on in the first place. But given the part of town I'm in it would have been odder to not see a weapon of some kind on my person. Someone was looking for me and had a bunch of weapons on them, what would my reaction have been?* He took off the quiver of arrow-spears and set that down, then stepped backwards away from it. "See, no weapons. The fact is I saw you in dream. You're a beacon of light against a bunch of skeletons and... I don't

know, what do you call a skeleton that still has flesh on it? Don said it once, I forget it now.”

“A zombie,” the wanderer at the mouth of the alley answered.

“Thank you. Wait what?” He looked over and there stood two wanderers, and his old friend the ghost. The wanderers were armed, again with swords and wearing armor, no doubt that gave them special abilities.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“*Separating from your friends? You were practically begging us to attack you. Don’t listen to him, whoever you are behind those boxes. He’ll betray you too, in the end. Don’t get involved and we’ll be on our way soon. We have no interest in you.*”

“I didn’t betray anyone, I simply closed a portal that kept this world safe from shadow kin. You have to understand, we couldn’t take the risk! The duke insisted, I wanted to find another way, but there was no time.”

“*Then you should have told me. I would have listened. We could have planned something together.*”

“Esta? Don’t do this, you know I had no malicious intent towards you!”

“*I know nothing of the kind. You made your own plans, told me something different, took advantage of me, and despite my precautions found the portal chamber.*”

“The duke made those plans, not me.”

Esta ignored him. “*And then you blew it up!*”

“Revenge!”

“Don’t you know any other words? The thing that blew you up is gone, and I’ve already started making sure no other lives are lost because of war machines like that. I lost someone in that explosion too, you think you were the only one? Go to Heaven already, are you going to chase me for thousands of years? I’ll find a way to get rid of you one way or the other. But I would prefer you left on your own.”

“We do not care what you prefer,” said the ghost, the longest thing Lysanias had ever heard it say. It raised a hand.

“*Oh great, is it going to try freezing me again? Hope I can hit it with my first shot like I did last time. No Don to help me out with a spell though.*” He glanced over at the now dumped out quiver, selecting an arrow-spear. Willing it forward he threw energy into his will and aimed for the ghost’s head. It dodged, knowing this time it really didn’t want to get hit by that thing, and Lysanias groaned. “*Great, now it’s still three on one and they’ll be on me before I can get my spirit out. Maybe I should have done that first? Or gotten out a ward first?*”

The group advanced, getting about half way to where he was when suddenly a female voice shouted out “Let light strike down my foes!” From behind the crates there was a swirling of bright magical energies, unlike anything Lysanias had seen before. This light then struck out, nearly blinding him as it slammed into all three of the figures, making them cry out. The two wanderers had dropped their swords and were clutching their chests. All three were squeezing their eyes shut as if blinded, and Elita burst from the boxes, running towards Lysanias. “Come on, that won’t blind them for long,” she called, scooping up his blade. “Let’s get out of here.” He grabbed up his quiver, steadying the arrow-spears inside with his ability to move earth, and she grabbed his hand. “This way.”

“*Don, Everest, I’ve been attacked,*” he hopefully sent into both their brains. “*But I “have” Elita and we’re running again. I’ll let you know where we end up hiding. Really wish you could get back to me, I have no idea if you’re hearing this.*”

Both figures left the alley at a run, winding through the streets and ignoring any passerby that scowled at them. Finally Elita pushed him inside a run down house that didn’t even have any windows, and slammed him up against the wall. His own sword was now at his neck, the sheath having been flung off as she went through the door.

“Now,” she said with steel in her voice. “You’re going to explain who you are and what you want with me. Or you’ll get the same as those three back there.” She leaned a little closer. “Or worse.”

## Up To Speed

When: No time has passed

Where: Abandoned house, sword to throat, pinned to wall

Lysanias looked over the face of the woman who had threatened to “or worse” him and decided she was probably serious. She had green eyes, and was looking slightly up at him meaning he was slightly taller. She was dressed in her “wench” clothes, having just been at work, and while not as attractive as Amy (who was?) she could probably rival the annunaki woman Yttrius in looks. *And not see me as a horse! Of course if what Amy said is true, and I have no doubt it is, she will also leave me once the crisis she is ‘recruited’ for is over. So let’s not get too attached, yes? She’s looking at you... Oh yeah she asked me to explain myself. Maybe better do that?*

“Yes, well, ah,” he began, wondering why he was feeling a bit excited about all this. *She’s got me backed up against the wall, sword to my throat, my own sword to be specific, and I’m comparing her to another girl and feeling a bit exhilarated? What is wrong with me? Actually, better make sure she doesn’t do anything rash.* He was touching the sword so he silently changed the fundamental nature of it, turning it harmless. “I guess we weren’t formally introduced. I’m Lysanias, and you are Elita, right?”

“Yes, I’m Elita. Keep talking.”

“Oh good. It would have been very awkward to have gotten the wrong girl. Woman! The wrong woman. I think I liked your hair better the way you had it before-” The sword got a little closer. “But of course it’s your hair and you should be comfortable with who you are and that means your hairstyle-”

“Stop stalling. What do you want with me?”

“Stalling? More like babbling, I’ve never really been in this sort of situation before-” Her eyes narrowed. “As I was saying, I’m Lysanias, age between fourteen and fifteen never got a good answer to when my birthday is now. Or it doesn’t matter because I’m thousands of years old. Depends on how you count time. Not important. What is important is I’ve saved the world twice now, you’re welcome. Need your help saving it a third time, what do you say?”

The sword pulled back a little. “What?”

“I need your help. One of my abilities is to dream the future. I dreamed of a skyebourne city spreading death and destruction wherever it went. Then zombies and skeletons washed over the land, tearing everything apart. But there was a light, a shining light that stood against them. You. But you can’t do it alone, and neither can we. We need to work together.”

“This is some sort of joke, right?” She turned her head to the side. “Elane? Trent? Did you put him up to this? I swear if you’ve cost me my job down at the inn I will bash your heads in while you sleep.” There was silence in the house, and Lysanias decided no one was going to answer her.

“Look, you’re a skyebourne. I’m told you have ‘somewhat more convenient magic’ than most. Can’t you put a spell on yourself to verify I’m telling the truth? You don’t need to pop down to the corner shop and pay a sack of silver, is what I’m saying.”

She stared hard at him, the initial hardness now giving way to curiosity. “If this is some attempt to bring me in, it’s the oddest by far. Say I believe you. Prove it.”

“You can’t just do magic?”

“On myself? No. I tried that once, it caused me problems. I try some kind of ‘truth telling’ magic and- what am I explaining myself to you for? You’re the one that needs to convince me! That means proving what you say.”

“Kind of hard with a sword pressed up against my throat,” *which again should not be this exciting. Maybe it’s just about her being in control? Not the time.* “But I’ll do my best.” He looked at her for a moment, seeking her aura. It took three tries but he caught

a glimpse of it, and she was terrified. *Doesn't look terrified. Odd.* Then he opened herself up to her past. Images rolled past him, settling on her wandering through the forest and meeting a curious individual. He smiled, it seemed he had his proof. "Less than a year ago you had to leave the place you were living very suddenly. While on the road you encountered a wounded wolf, and were afraid he was going to attack you. You used magic and tamed him, then healed him. But the magic didn't take and before the end of the month he had left you. And I can see you're terrified now, but you don't have to be. Whatever you're running from you're safe with me." *Hey, I sounded all confident and stuff just then. 'You're safe with me!' Ha! Wasn't she just in a combat situation because I was around? No matter, get her to trust you first, then work on keeping her safe.*

The sword clattered to the ground and Elita staggered back, hands over her mouth. "There's no way you could know that!"

"There's every way I can know that. I learned that skill from a nymph named Amy who was being held hostage by a wizard named Americut. He had her stealing magic, and I stole her away from him. He went on trial for the theft of the magic, but escaped by throwing a fiendstone at us. It became a troll, my friends and I managed to take it out and we traded it for an alchemist's training. I'm technically a field agent for the alchemist branch of the wizard's guild. It's how I can do this." *Great, I'm babbling again. It's either too shy to talk to people or running my mouth nonstop is that it? Still, I'm in for it now.* He picked the sword up and ran it along his own arm. Elita stared at where the wound should be, and then ran her own finger over the edge.

"It's sharp, but it doesn't cut."

"For the next minute or so it's completely useless as a weapon. Am I starting to convince you?"

"I... I don't know. You're not here to take me back to K'Reel?"

"I don't know what that is."

"The skyebourne city I lived in for eighteen years."

"We may have to somehow go to a skyebourne city to figure out why my dream shows it spewing undead creatures all over the place. But dragging you back in chains or something? No. Why?"

"Because I left. It's illegal to leave a city. Not that anyone wants to, up there. But it still is." She suddenly smiled, lighting up her face. "And after I left I figured out why."

"Oh yeah? Why?"

"Hummm, maybe I'll tell you, maybe I won't. But seriously, your friend back in Fareborough asked me, a skyebourne mind you, if I remembered the skyebourne. Then you show up a couple of months later asking around for me. How am I supposed to deal with this?"

"I don't know what to tell you about that. Total coincidence, I guess? Sorry if he caused you any trouble, it was an innocent enough question."

"I see. And it did, by the way. I got so spooked I came to another kingdom because of it!"

"Sorry." Lysanias' head drooped, he really was not sure how to respond to this. *Who could have known that one question would have caused her so much grief? I guess Amy was right, everything is connected. Everything moves everything else. Even a simple question asked in ignorance can cause a chain of events that change someone's destiny. Take us, would we have bothered building our balloon if we hadn't needed to go so far away? Would we have needed to go so far away if Xerxes hadn't asked the only skyebourne around if she knew about skyebourne? What ripples have I made in the world that I don't even know of yet, or will never see?*

"It's fine. Luckily most people *don't* remember the skyebourne, we've been gone for ages from 'soil' as they call it. Apart from that one time oh thirty years ago or so when the empress tried to reconquer it. I wasn't born yet, but I heard about it from my parents."

“She did what? What stopped her?”

“Her own stupidity? It was an isolated area so nobody really heard about it, thankfully. So we’re still sort of obscure. Look, I can see we’re going to have a lot of questions for the other. Belt your sword on and we can get out of here.”

“Out of here?”

“You want my help saving the world? Sure, I’m in. Why not?” She threw her hands up. “Better than staying in this dump. I’m squatting here along with some others in case you hadn’t guessed. With my recent display at my latest place of employment I can kiss that job goodbye.” She suddenly seemed thoughtful. “Does saving the world pay well?”

“We’re not hurting for coin,” he hedged. *We’ve always managed to get along, mainly by not needing to buy food all the time. And I can always make a new glass or now sell some metal if we need a bunch of money.*

“Sounds good to me!”

“Let me contact my friends and see what our next step is. Where are we, by the way? How do I tell someone how to get here?”

“Friends?”

“You think I saved the world twice by myself? Those people I was with, the dwarf and the gnome.”

“Oh them. Wait a second, how come you speak Magician so well? I just noticed that.” Lysanias closed his eyes, resisting the urge to scream. *The same thing every time.* “Oh, it’s complicated, huh? Never mind, you can tell me later. How are you going to contact them?”

He tapped his head. *Like this,* he pushed into her brain.

“You are full of surprises. Okay, tell them to follow the light in the sky. If I’m leaving I can afford to be a little showy.”

“Showy? Light in the sky? What are you talking about?”

“The one I’m about to create. Come on.”

They went back outside and she whirled her arms around in an exaggerated motion. “Light!” she shouted, and magic energy swirled around her. Again it was brighter than anything Lysanias had seen “traditional” magic produce, but a ball of light shot into the air. *Is that just skyebourne magic? I can’t wait to learn how to do it.*

*Don, I’m sending this just to you so it’s easier. Hopefully you’re still at least nearby the inn which I hope is in the direction I’m looking in. I further hope you’re seeing the ball of light in the sky. Our skyebourne light of hope is making it happen. Come find us, I think she’s onboard.*

“Now we wait,” he said, “and hope they got the message.”

“Is there a chance they didn’t?”

“Sure. I’m not very good at it. But they aren’t half a world away, either. It’s just with Amy she could send back, so I knew she could hear me.” *Come to think of it, I should give them all a set of the wards to communicate, that way if we do get separated from each other, it’s not as bad. Maybe I can get some thin metal sheets so they wouldn’t have to worry about the wards getting crumpled or dirty and stop working.*

“I see.”

“If they don’t come soon I’ll just resend it.”

A few awkward moments of waiting later and both Don and Everest jogged to where the light was. Having fulfilled the function it winked out, and Elita looked them over.

“So you three have saved the world twice already?” she asked, hands on her hips. “You don’t look like the knight in shining armor type.”

“Ah, already hit you with that one?” Don said, bumping Lysanias with an elbow.

“Good job lad, impress her right from the start with stories of our daring and adventure!”

“She impressed me! I got attacked by that stupid ghost and Esta was with some

other wanderer. She shot light at them and we got away.”

“You got attacked again? Are you okay?”

“We’re fine. I missed with my arrow-spear, seems the ghost knows I can hurt him now, but one spell from our new friend here and the combat was over.”

“Impressive. This group finally has someone with attack magic?” Everest asked. “I just got a spell lens a little while ago, so I’m pretty new to magic, myself. Our group has no attack spells at all, and it’s been a problem. More lately but still.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yup.” There was a moment of silence. “Why not introduce us?” Everest prompted him.

“Right. This is, shoot I didn’t think about it. This is Grizzwald Ironheart, a giant that was tragically cursed to wander the land looking up at everyone until he learned the true meaning of friendship.”

“Don Fortress, nice to meet you,” said Don, offering his hand. (He didn’t know you should let the lady initiate the handshake)

She looked confused, but shook it.

“And this walking pile of rubble is actually three fairies inside a protective shell they’ve put together. Bunnyhead, Cottonears, and Puffytail.”

“Everest,” he clarified, also shaking her hand. “You don’t have to do it every time you know,” he said to Lysanias.

“You guys started it. I’m making sure we take this joke alllllll the way to the grave if we have to.” He pointed to the ground. “It will serve you both right.”

“I’ve changed my mind, I’m going to try getting my job back,” Elita announced. She turned to leave. “Maybe if I beg, open my shirt up a little, you know the standard…”

“Wait, wait, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you or anything!” cried Lysanias.

“You better be. So it’s three boys, one girl? It’s going to be nothing but fart jokes and expecting me to do the washing up, isn’t it?”

“Washing up?” all three asked, wondering what she was talking about. They traded a look but it was obvious none knew what she was saying.

“Yeah, I already regret it. Anyway, welcome to my humble home, such as it is. Perhaps we could leave?”

“Didn’t have any plans after finding you,” Lysanias admitted. “So I’m not sure what our next destination is.”

“We’ve been relying on Lysanias’ dreams, and they all pointed to you,” Everest agreed. “We’ll have to spend the night someplace and see what he dreams of next.”

“We’re honestly relying on this guy’s dreams to tell us what to do next?”

“Got us this far.”

“There’s one thing I’d like to do, and that’s learn any combat magic you know,” Don suggested. “We’re somewhat short of it, no pun intended, and the guild won’t sell us any because we’re not a member.”

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t work. From what I’ve learned of how you guys do magic it’s totally different than how I do it. You need formula and such, I don’t.”

“Is that so? Perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

“Here in the street? Can we please go somewhere else?”

*Why does she want to be gone from this place so badly? But I can somewhat see her point.* “Let’s go to a tavern or something,” Lysanias suggested. “We can sit and talk and decide our next move.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go!”

“We might not come back here, do you need to get anything?” Everest asked.

“Nope, I travel pretty light. Everything I have I carry with me.”

*Meaning she doesn’t have anything? At least when I woke up I had the sword. And two new friends. What has she been through?*

“Then lead on,” Don suggested. “You must know this city better than we do.”

The group stopped at a place with a sign that looked like a knife, fork, and spoon, and everyone ordered what they wanted.

“So tell me about saving the world all these times,” Elita demanded. “What exactly am I getting myself into?”

“This whole thing started when these two woke me up,” Lysanias began. “I had been asleep for thousands of years to protect me from the Allfather’s wrath when He decided to wipe out the progenitors. The flood, if you’re familiar?” She shook her head. “I’m not surprised. I was supposed to be woken up after that, but it never happened. They stumbled onto me by accident.”

“You really are thousands of years old?”

“I’m about fifteen. If I was thousands of years old I would probably have enough skills to take care of whatever’s coming by myself. Was I born thousands of years ago? Yes.”

“Okay, I see the distinction. But if you hadn’t been asleep would you still be alive?”

“Yes. The original people the Allfather created didn’t die of old age, apparently, like you ‘new people’ do. And to answer your next question, we can learn to do anything we’re taught to do. We first got lessons from angels, but I’ve been learning from people here. That’s why I say thousands of years of learning would have let me deal with this myself. But I can’t yet, and I’ll want to learn your type of magic at some point.”

She looked troubled. “That may not be a good idea. I’ll tell you why later, go on with your tale for now.” She waved a hand, dismissing it for now.

“While leaving the tunnels they found me in we came upon an elven village that had been taken over. That’s when we first learned of the shadow kin. They’re some kind of shadow creature that came here from another world, through a portal but I’ll come to that later.”

“Okay.”

“It had taken over an annunaki, a lizard person, and he and a small group of followers had come to the surface to reactivate a giant war machine and use it to wage a campaign against us. We learned about it from Yttrius, an annunaki woman who traveled with us going after her father, who had gotten caught up in the plan. Apparently the shadow kin could use the host’s magic and put some kind of spell on them to keep them following him. The war machine got dug up and we stopped it.”

“Barely,” added Everest. “If the shadow kin hadn’t come out of the thing to face you, I don’t know what we would have done to the war machine. We couldn’t have torn it apart like we did the inactive one.”

“True. I’m sure we would have thought of something.”

“I finished it off,” Don said proudly.

“From behind, after I weakened it,” Lysanias reminded him.

“Always with the unimportant details. Go on with your story.”

“After that we wanted to deal with the huge war machine and agreed to escort it someplace it could be dismantled. After the ‘person’ inside was transferred to a new body, of course.”

“Of course. Body transfer, do it all the time,” Elita remarked.

“You do?”

She leveled a look at him. “No. Go on.”

“Right, you were joking. Got it. We helped some fairies out and got there, but they had other ideas.”

“Remnants, you know about them?” asked Don.

“A little. Not many come to inns to eat.”

“I could see that being the case.”

“They wanted to serve us. Pretty badly, actually,” Lysanias went on. “Oh, we found Amy on the way there, she’s the seer I told you about earlier.”

“The nymph?”

“Right. Water nymph.”

“Okay.”

“So we got there, they took P05’s brain, if you will, put it into a smaller body, but then to make sure we stayed there so they could ‘serve’ us, they put another brain into the war machine.”

“Didn’t work out so well,” Everest admitted.

“It ran off, looking for someone to serve,” Don added.

“We chased it, and P05 showed us how to blow it up. Sacrificed themselves to do it, too, because I was being an idiot at the time. That’s where the ghost came from. There was some settlement nearby that got destroyed.”

“I see.”

“We got to Farborough, met the alchemists, freed Amy from Americut who like I said got away, then started looking for more shadow kin.”

“We knew more were out there,” Don explained. “Amy’s dreams warned her that many more were about to show up.”

“The land would be covered in them, she said,” Everest agreed.

“Right. So we looked for some I dreamed about in town. Found them too. Sadly, that ended with me cutting down a shopkeeper, because again I was being stupid. I should have figured out how to deal with them *first*, then gone to deal with them. But I didn’t.”

“He got arrested for murder,” Everest told her.

“Murder? Even I’ve never gone that far!” Elita told them.

“How far have you gone lass?”

“Never you mind, this is your story time.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anyway, that trial happened. But the judge was a shadow kin, and a wanderer saved me using a device brought from their home. We learned the wanderers and the shadow kin came from the same world, through a portal opened up by the chaos moon.”

“And now our story takes a very dark turn,” Everest admitted.

Lysanias nodded. “The duke ordered us to close it, but not tell Esta our plan. So they led us to the area and we blew it up.”

“My spell lens came from crystal we picked up there,” Everest showed her, tapping the gauntlet with the lens set into it.

“I’ve not seen one of them.” She looked it over with an appraiser’s eye. “They’re really expensive, aren’t they?”

“Not so bad when you make it yourself,” Don told her. “I know how to fabricate, so it wasn’t as tricky as you might think, making something to let someone access magic. Had to pay for the lesson in this, specifically, but that was no problem. The alchemists we knew helped in grinding down the crystal and provided some materials, it was a group effort but they were interested in the process too so we all got something out of it.”

“Could you teach me to do that stuff?” she asked excitedly. “I don’t know anything about the other non-spellcasting magical skills.”

“Sure, not a problem.”

“Great. Anyway, go on.”

“Where was I? We blew it up, right. That got them mad at me. But at least we closed the portal and kept thousands of shadow kin on the other side.”

“But the wanderers are angry because any of their kind are stuck there too,” explained Don. “And that’s why they’re after us.”

“We don’t know who’s sending them. They’ve attacked us several times. They seem to know the worst time, and have equipment that’s magically active. So someone is helping them.”

“And then I started dreaming about the skybourne, and undead all over the place.”

“That’s where I come into the picture?” The three nodded. “Well!” She leaned back in her chair, thinking about all this.

“From here, it’s try to figure out who is sending the wanderers after us, and stop this skybourne plot before it’s too late,” Everest suggested. “You okay with that?”

“You know something? I think I just might be.”

The food arrived, and everyone got busy digging in.

“Guess it must be my turn then,” Elita said after a moment. “My story begins with the day I first folded a piece of paper...”

## Elita's Tale

When: A mouthful of food later

Where: The Silver Cutlery Tavern

"No, let me start a little earlier than that," Elita amended. "Let me start at the beginning. I was born in the skyebourne city of K'Reel nearly twenty one years ago. I was born to two loving parents, and they named me Elita O'gratsi. From the start, my parents didn't quite know what to make of me. I was always asking questions, running around, oh and magic didn't work on me."

"Didn't work on you?" asked Everest.

"That's right. We have these booths, right? You step in, you get clean, you step out. Easy. Lots of things in the cities are easy. In fact most things in the cities are easy. You want something? Go to a dispensary and get it. You're hungry? A table will create a fabulous meal out of nothing. And so on. But when my parents tried to use the booth to clean me off, it didn't work. They would stick me in, nothing would happen. They would step in, it would work. Then me, nothing. So it wasn't broken, it just didn't 'like' me for lack of a better term. So they had to set me up with a bathing area, which took some doing. But life went on, I found I love swimming, and I stayed mostly clean.

"But I also stayed mostly alone. Lots of games the other kids played didn't work for me. There's a game where you run around and try to 'shoot' the other person with a magic wand, leaving a colored splotch. After a while they thought I was cheating because I never had a mark on me. They finally just held me down and 'shot' me over and over. Didn't work. I could give you more examples but that's my childhood in a nut shell. So I did things on my own.

"And one of the things I liked to do on my own was paper folding. I was pretty good, I could make flowers, cats, houses, trees, shapes, you name it. But one day I folded something quite different. Do you have any paper?"

Lysanias reached into his pack and took out a sheet of paper for her. *Have to remember to get more before I leave town. I've been making a lot of wards lately.*

"Thanks. It was so long ago but I think it was something like this." She made a few quick folds and then whooshed what people thousands of years ago would have called a "paper airplane" through the air. "That got me interested in flying."

"Couldn't you fly by magic?" Everest asked.

"That's not how it works," she tried to explain. "The people in the cities, they don't *do* magic. They use magical items, yes, but those have been around forever. When I lived in K'Reel I didn't see a single spell cast by a single person in eighteen years."

The others absorbed this.

"But you can do magic now!" protested Don. "Are you telling me in all your years nobody thought there was something they wanted that an existing magical item couldn't do and went about finding a spell to make it happen?"

"That's what I'm saying. Don't get ahead of the story."

"Sorry."

"I became obsessed with flying. I made different designs, tried different materials, dropped stuff off the side of the city to watch it fall. My parents really didn't know what to make of it. But I wasn't hurting anyone so they sort of looked the other way. Most kids by that time were 'under the spell of the city' I used to call it. They didn't want to play as much, didn't care about things as much. *Anything*. Life was easy and they got fatter and lazier."

"But you didn't?" asked Lysanias.

"That's right. I was still swimming all the time, exploring, building. Reading, asking questions. The people my age were turning into their parents. Letting magic items do everything for them. They seemed content to sit and watch the clouds an entire day. Or wrote a single line of a poem they never finished. Or just nap. They never

accomplished anything, never tried to better themselves. I couldn't stand a one of them! So I went everywhere, poked my nose into everything. That's how I discovered something was wrong.

"People were disappearing. I would go by a house one day and there would be three people there. Then a week later it would be empty and cold, days since anyone was there. Even then I was a bit of a thief..." She chuckled. "Anyway, my parents didn't seem to care but I was worried. I snuck down to the control center and listened in when someone was talking to other cities, and apparently it was happening all over. I was scared. I say snuck down but there was no security. No one cared to go down there, so it wasn't guarded. I just had to find my way, no one was there to stop me."

"How long ago was this?" Everest asked.

"About three years. I was probably about eighteen."

"Okay."

"What could I do? The houses I found that were empty showed no signs of struggle. The people had just vanished. But everyone I talked to didn't care. Neighbors, my old 'friends,' my parents. I didn't know how to fight, didn't know how to investigate things. Honestly I still don't. So I decided to leave. They wouldn't get me, I remember thinking. I got one of the flying devices out that I had made, the largest and most capable one I thought, and without even saying goodbye to my parents jumped from the side." She sighed. "I still wonder how they reacted, if they cared at all. They didn't seem to care about much, how long before they realized I was gone?"

"On the bright side, presumably it worked," Don guessed. "So maybe one day you can go back and ask them."

She smiled. "Maybe, and it did. My greatest creation, a huge 'glider' that bore me safely to 'soil.' That's when I realized maybe I shouldn't have been so hasty."

"Where did you end up?" Lysanias asked.

"The wilderness somewhere. Kilometers from anything, but at least from above I had some idea which way to go. I started off, but I noticed something strange. I felt this sort of buzzing in my head I had never felt before. I thought it was just from the trip down, or because being on 'soil' was dangerous, like my parents had always told me. I ignored it and made for the town. You have no idea how small things look from the air but how far away they really are."

The three men smirked at each other.

"What?"

"When you see how we travel, you might change your mind about that statement," Don told her.

"Okay. I was not ready for soil. I staggered on, sleeping at night but with nothing to eat or drink. I found water where I could but then a few days after I had landed I smelled something cooking. I was so hungry I stumbled towards it. Turned out to be a person, being roasted by three monsters I know now as trolls."

*How is this woman still alive? Is she making this all up?*

"You know what a troll likes more than one poor soul to roast? Two. They all grinned and started towards me. I was sure I was dead. I had left my home, came to soil to try avoid the fate of my neighbors only to have a different, worse fate befall me. I knew I had one chance. I had always heard about angels and demons and such, but my people don't really worship like the people here do. So I called out to any power that would listen. 'Strike these monsters down,' I cried. That buzzing in my head got worse, and I sort of tapped into it. That's when a blinding flash of light struck all three trolls and when my vision cleared, all three of them had been turned into stone."

Don whistled. "Not bad, lass, not bad at all. We had a lot of trouble with the troll we ran into, so that's quite a feat."

"I'd love to see them!" Everest told her.

"They're probably still rotting out there," Elita allowed. "Who would move a huge troll statue? They were frozen in such a weird position, too. Anyway, there was nothing

for me to eat there so I went on, collapsing not long after that. When I woke I tried to figure out what had happened.”

“Did you go back and see the trolls?” Lysanias asked. *If she’s making it up she would have trouble saying she had.*

“I did. It could have been a dream otherwise. But no, there they were. Still rock, and the buzzing in my head wasn’t as bad. But something had replaced it. I could feel that spell I had done, almost see it out of the corner of my eye. I don’t know how long I sat there, staring at what I had done. Finally my hunger drove me to experiment more. I knew I could make food with magic, it had been done all my life. I had to tap into that buzz in my head, and finally I managed to make a small mountain of food. I eventually made water the same way, and felt I actually had a chance now. I went on.”

How long until you reached a town?” Don asked.

“I don’t even know. But I did, and I was filthy, exhausted, and probably sick I felt so strange. I knew I couldn’t enter the town looking like I did, so I tried one more bit of magic before going in. I tried to clean myself.” She shook her head, remembering. “I drew on the buzz, forcing magic to do what I wanted. But it rebounded or something, and instead of getting clean I just got dirtier. I was nearly feral at that point, I just started laughing and screaming. A homeless man outside the gate heard me and came running, and I must have looked a sight. I tried to strike him down but again the magic must not have worked because I next knew he was sitting by my side, asleep. Someone had washed me up and I hadn’t even noticed, so I figured I was safe for the moment. I stayed.”

“A homeless man saved you, huh?” Everest asked.

“Not that I understood what that was, at the time,” she admitted. “But learning that was a long time coming. I couldn’t even understand his language at first. But he was part of a gang and they took me in, taught me some things about surviving on the ground.”

“You speak trade pretty well,” Don told her.

She shook her head with a laugh. “Had to. I couldn’t talk to anybody so I was hungry to learn. Because of me, that gang became a real pain for the guards. While I couldn’t do magic on myself I could do it on others, and to survive we had to steal. Oh, I could make them food all right, but they wanted a better life. So I let them walk through walls. Or I would scout a place, look through the windows and then just use magic to grab things from the house without ever going inside. We took care of each other for at least a year like that, trying not to attract too much notice.”

“But eventually you did?” Everest asked.

“Yeah. Mage’s guild didn’t exactly like some hotshot girl going around using weird magic to steal stuff. So they started looking for us. About that time I decided it might be best if I moved on, so I did. Stayed in Farborough after that. Selling the stuff I had stolen I got some new clothes, changed my hairstyle and actually got a real job. Thought I would lay low, now that I knew a bit more how this world worked.”

“And then we showed up?” Lysanias asked.

“That’s right. I thought maybe either the wizard’s guild had finally caught up with me or a skybourne party had found me. I took off for Silveria that night. I was halfway through the pass when I realized I had been foolish. Why would they have been so clumsy, I asked myself. Why give me time to escape? But by then I had to just keep going. I found a similar sort of job here and was saving to rent a place of my own. I didn’t want to go back to being a thief. Or have anyone find out I could help them be one. So I changed my hair again, waited tables, and you followed me, all the way here.”

“And now you can help save the world!” Lysanias told her happily. “But I still don’t understand why my learning your type of magic would be a problem.”

“Let me give you an example. It’s been three years since I heard my native language, right? What if I went another five years without hearing it, then went home? Would I speak it as well as I did eight years ago?”

"Probably not. Not unless you practiced talking to yourself or wrote stories in that language or something," Don admitted.

"Exactly. You forget things you don't use. I hadn't needed that attack magic since that first time I used it on the trolls. But ever since I did, it's been there, just at the corner of my eye. As fresh as the day I used it, ready to be used again. *I can't forget it.* I can't forget any of the magic I've done. They're all just crowding there," she waved her fingers off to the side of her face. "I can almost touch them."

"Wow," said Everest. "I go over and over the spells I've learned so I make sure I don't forget them when I need them. Lysanias is the same way, looking that book of notes of his over, and practicing stuff all the time. To never have a spell leave your mind? What an odd thing."

"And worrisome. What if I did everything magically? Clean my room? Fly? Change the color of my hair? Would those spells crowd me out of my own brain? Would I be nothing but that magic? Forget how to do anything but those spells? I think it's a risk."

"I see what you mean," Lysanias agreed.

"So will I teach you my kind of magic? Sure. It's our legacy, and it's all but died out for some reason. Maybe one day it'll only be inside you, and if that's so, fine. We did it to ourselves. Maybe you can figure out why nobody uses it anymore if you learn about it. No, worse than that, willingly didn't pass it down to their kids or somehow prevented us from using it altogether. But you have to know the same could happen to you. You would have to promise me that what you do with my magic is something you'll either do every day like clean yourself, or something you can't do any other way. Something like my troll burning spell, which you reach for in a moment of panic because otherwise you're dead."

"No, no, I understand. With all I can do, it might get crowded out by this type of magic if I overuse it. I'll agree to that."

"But why, if you just sort of wished for the magic and had it happen, couldn't you have done that in your city?" asked Everest. "No person for hundreds of years wished really hard for something and had the magic answer? I find that hard to believe. Nobody can be that uncaring about *everything.*"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe something about the city dampens it? But we must have used magic originally, where did all the magical items come from? Why make floating cities full of Skye Bourne's children and then take their magic away? For my part I still have the buzzing in my head, haven't really thought about it anymore, it's just a part of me. All I know is what I told you. What I experienced myself since coming here."

"Don't know what it would have to do with undead and the skyebourne cities spreading death everywhere," Don told him.

"Probably nothing, just something new to explore. Aren't you at all curious about things?"

"You're curious enough about things for the both of us. So, what exactly can you do?" he asked Elita.

"What spells have I cast over the years, you mean? As I'm sure you don't care about my skill opening locks or sewing?"

"Any combat skills you have like using a sword would be nice to know. Lysanias can make you one, if you needed it."

"I have no combat experience at all, sorry. The two situations I've been in my magic solved the problem immediately."

"Going to have to work on that, maybe you can have a set of Everest's daggers."

He nodded. "One made of light, one made of iron, for the ghost. Yeah, I can train you to use the dagger. Might come in handy while waiting tables if someone gets frisky."

She shook her head. "Management frowns on stabbing the customers. But I'll keep it in mind. To answer your question I have the light spell that hurts people. Food

and water making. I can tame animals like I did with the wolf, and heal. I can make you like a ghost, so you can walk through stuff, and wish an object I know the location of into my hand. And I have one more, I can stick things into a space that doesn't exist and then get them back out again. Yeah, I actually mentioned all of them in my story. Oh, and that ball of light I made, but you saw that."

*A contain ward without a ward, in other words? That would be nice.* "Each one had a real impact on how you got here," Lysanias agreed. "You couldn't just use dozens of spells for fear of having them take you over."

"I tend not to use too much magic," she admitted. "Even buying most of my food. It hurts my head sometimes, or occasionally goes wild. One time I filled up a room with sausages. A whole room. Sausages everywhere. Getting out was a bit tricky..."

"What were you thinking of at the time of casting?" Don asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Not that, believe me. I don't know if I just don't know how to control it, or what."

"Maybe by teaching me we can work that out. Your casting seemed brighter than what I've seen, I'd be interested to see if my casting lights are that bright. They weren't circles though, that's the oddest thing I saw. When she did the light spell it was just motes of light dancing around her."

"I suppose we're envisioning formula," Everest thought. "That expresses itself in the form of those magical circles we see. Elita just envisions a result, there is no formula. So naturally she doesn't get the same sort of circle."

"I wonder if I will? I guess we'll have to see."

"I guess," Don agreed. "For now let's pay for our meal, find a place to stay, and in the morning hopefully our resident dreamer will have some more information for us."

"I can read the stones again, too," he mused. "But didn't one of you want to go magic shopping? Maybe someone around here would have attack magic to sell?"

"Don't count on it," Elita warned him. "The guild is felt here, even in the slums. Someone gets hold of a magical item they shouldn't have, or is healed by magic and can't pay? They'll be swarming the place, believe me."

"Great. Dreams it is!"

"How much do I owe?" Elita asked. "I can get my pouch out, though it will be a bit loud and flashy."

"Don't worry about it lass, we don't exactly keep track of it like that."

"Are you sure?" She seemed quite surprised.

"Course I am. Don't worry about it."

"Thanks," she said quietly, looking down.

Lysanias hid a smile. *I think we're going to help each other out in a lot of ways. I can't wait to get started.*

## The Bunny Initiative

When: Early morning the next day

Where: Realm of dreams

In the dream, Lysanias saw four rabbits on a hill hopping and nibbling clover. The lives of the rabbits were carefree, and none wanted for anything. One rabbit had a wild beard, and a mangy coat that needed a good brushing. Another had a beard that was trimmed and twined with ribbons the color of his enemies' blood. One rabbit seemed made of stone while the fourth, smaller than the rest but no less fierce, kept trying to hide in the shadows of the others.

In the dream, the sun darkened, and the rabbits looked up. High, high above was a floating island, where a jackal sat laughing on his stolen throne. As the grass around the rabbits died, wolves appeared in a ring around them, but the rabbits stood their ground.

In the dream, the wolves attacked the rabbits, but despite being outnumbered the rabbits were winning. One rabbit, a bearded one, could make the wolves disappear as they leapt at him. The other rabbit jumped atop the heads of the wolves and knocked them out. Lysanias saw that as he did, the wolves were actually sheep, they were simply pretending to be wolves because the jackal had told them to. The third broke the bones of the wolves with savage kicks, but these wolves it seemed had simply been bones all along.

It was the fourth rabbit that had the toughest job of all. The rabbit of stone, he hopped upon the many small fires the jackal was setting around the battlefield in order to protect the others. When he could, the rabbit kicked dust and rocks at the jackal until he fell from the throne and the day was saved.

"Okay, what the heck was that?" Lysanias asked himself as he awoke the next day.

"So... rabbits?" Elita said into the silence that followed Lysanias relaying this latest dream of his. The group was assembled in the dining area of the inn they had stayed at, which was mostly empty at this hour.

"Yes, four rabbits."

"Cute, fuzzy bunnies? Twitchy noses? Long ears?" She made a "about this big" shape with her hands.

"It's dream imagery. I'm still not that great at it, be glad we get even this level of warning about the future."

"But rabbits?"

"What do you have against rabbits?" asked Everest.

"Nothing, I guess. It's just odd to hear about a dream that features, presumably, the four of us but as bunnies. Does that mean we should turn ourselves *into* bunnies? Is that somehow beneficial to our coming battle?"

"I don't think it's meant to be taken latterly," Don assured her.

"You mean literally," Everest corrected.

"She knew what I meant."

"I certainly hope not. Does it give us any hint as to what to do next, though?"

"Maybe?" hedged Lysanias. "I think we all have a role in the upcoming battle. We just need to figure out what that role is, and find out how to fill it. One of the two bearded rabbits is me, probably the one with the wilder beard."

"It is getting a bit wild, trimming it is fine lad."

"With what, my sword? Anyway, if we assume that's true I made the wolves that attacked disappear. Does that mean I should make a ton of contain wards and fight by

just sticking them on people? Seems inefficient to always have to be pulling wards out of my dispenser in a melee.”

“Be an interesting way to end a combat,” Everest mused. “We saw that lava the dwarves were using to melt their iron down. How about a magical object you smack someone with and they teleport someplace. Like, above that lava pit?”

“A bit brutal, isn’t it?” Elita asked, somewhat shocked. “I mean the wolves were sheep, some of them. Doesn’t that imply some are innocent? Why would Don Bunny be knocking them out otherwise?”

“Don Bunny? That’s your name from now on,” Everest told him with a smirk.

“That’s fine, Everest... Cottontail. I’ll think of a better one later,” he grumbled, when Everest shook his head.

“Yeah, good luck with that. D.B.”

“Anyway, there were not wolves and I don’t know, foxes or something. They were all wolves. The dream would have distinguished between sheep wolves and wolf wolves right?”

“I have no idea,” admitted Lysanias. “I’ll think about it some more. So what about,” he snickered, “Don Bunny here? Can you knock out undead? Presumably that’s what the wolves represent, given that’s what my dreams were about up until this point.”

“There is magic to magically knock people out,” mused Don. “In fact Neptune spells can be non-lethal. I can cast Neptune so it makes sense, I just have to learn some combat spells of that planet. Knocking out undead? That’s a different story. I don’t know.”

“I don’t either,” admitted Everest. “We could read up on it though, this city must have a library.”

“Okay, what about me?” asked Elita. “What do you think I was doing?”

“Attacking the skeletons. That light spell of yours, it would be fairly effective against undead right?” Don asked.

“I guess. Skeletons don’t really have eyes though, so they probably wouldn’t be blinded?”

“What exactly does that spell do?” Everest asked.

“I sort of choose what targets to hit and the elemental energy jumps between them. Why?”

Everest rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I have to wonder if there isn’t a more effective strategy. Use the same spell, that’s fine, but make it heal instead of harm.”

“What good would that do?”

“Easy. Say one of us takes a hit. You can designate that person as one of the targets, as well as keep attacking the undead at the same time.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s an excellent idea! But why not just an explosion of healing energy all around us? That would keep undead at bay.”

“Normally, I would agree.” He nodded his head. “But this sheep thing has me worried. What if we can save the ‘wolves’ that are attacking us, and you kill some by accident beforehand? That’s why the knockout by Don Bunny.”

“You’re really calling me that?”

“I said I was, weren’t you listening?”

“Oh, I was listening, Bunverest.”

He shook his head again. “No, no keep trying.”

“I can use both. Alternate if I needed to. I’ll keep it in mind. And healing is always useful, so I wouldn’t mind that spell bouncing around my head.”

“You still should get some practice in with the dagger,” Everest told her. “Just in case.”

“I don’t mind. My magic does wear me out, so depending on how long the combat went for, I might want an actual weapon.”

“As for me, what was this suppressing fire business all about?”

“The jackal was casting spells, I guess?”

"Fire spells? I know how to make water already, maybe I should get some combat spells that do water damage? That would negate fire."

"It seemed more general than that, like it wasn't literal fire. We can think about it."

"All of this still comes back to one thing," complained Don. "We need more combat magic. And that leaves very few options for us."

"Ha-ha!" Elita teased, pointing to them all.

"At least I can forget a spell if I don't use it for a while," Don countered.

"Some might say my way was a benefit."

"Our options," he continued pointedly, "are a guild membership which would probably take all our money currently. Some kind of black market dealings, always fun. Developing the spells ourselves, very costly and dangerous. Or..." and he paused, looking sour. "Finding Americut's group and seeing what they can offer us."

"Before he left, he did invite Lysanias to get in touch," Everest admitted. "But how? We have to assume the guild wants to find the man far more than we do. If he can hide out from them, how are we going to find him? I think I heard Amy say anything that blocked magical gathering of information blocked her too. That's why she couldn't just go into the guild building, right?"

"That's right, I'm not thinking of doing it with my abilities."

"How then?"

Lysanias said with a smile, "we're going to get him to come to us."

"Dun dun dun!" Everest intoned.

"What? What language was that?" Don asked.

"It was dramatic music, it fit the tone of his announcement."

"Whatever. Mountain Hopper."

"Hey, getting better. I would have said Hoppy Mountain."

"Hoppy McMountain Face."

Everest seemed pained. "You don't have to be crude."

"Children, please. How is this guy going to come to us?" Elita asked.

"If Amy hasn't thrown away the summoning device, she can bring it to us. We can then activate it and set a place to meet."

"Taking your new girlfriend to meet your old girlfriend? You're playing with fire," Don cautioned him.

"What did he say? Was that Dwarven?" Elita told them.

"Oh sorry, lass, slipped back into me old mother tongue there a bit I did. I was just saying we should be careful dealing with Americut. We did get him put on trial after all. His invitation to meet could be a trap."

"I got the sense that was all part of his plan. He did come prepared. What I mean is if it hadn't been me it would have been someone else. He needed the court case to raise awareness of the issue. But yes, I'll be careful. Besides, I'll have you three won't I?"

"Always," Don and Everest agreed.

"So what are we doing outside of town?" Elita asked as they passed the city gates again.

"I'll need to put some effort into locating Amy, then find some ley lines to hook into for the teleport. It's not something I want to mess up."

"What's a ley line?"

"Energy conduit for the earth. I can tap into them and use the energy to boost what I'm doing. I really need to practice my teleportation but then there's a lot of things I need to practice, so..."

"Ugh, that means wards again," Everest groaned.

"Afraid so."

"Wards?"

"We have to go inside contain wards for a few minutes while he teleports. He can't lift us all and move through space at the same time," Don explained. "I'll fill you in while he finds Amy."

"How can you not know where she is?"

"I do know where she is. Either wandering around Farborough or more likely in her underground spring. I don't know the direction of either of those things, which is what I'm about to find out. I need to know her general direction to send her my thoughts, so I can ask if she still has the thing we need."

"Ah, okay. Could I use these lines? Using my magic tires me out, I have to assume they would help."

"I could try to teach you, but neither Don nor Everest could. I don't understand the reason why except 'that's what the Allfather wanted.'"

"Maybe with magic?" Everest suggested.

"You would need a spell to locate them, then a spell to draw the power off it. I don't know," Lysanias shook his head. "Easier to use spirit energy wards to replenish yourself. I should make some more of them, now that I can see ley lines. Not all of the energy would have to come from me. Huh."

The group walked some ways away from the wall of the city and Lysanias sat down to ask the universe what direction Amy was in. That done he turned in that direction and sent his thoughts out into the universe.

*Amy, can you hear me? I'm south of your current position, if you can tell which direction that is from where you are.*

*Lysanias? I can hear you just fine. How are you?*

*Pretty good, actually. You?*

*Oh, doing okay. What's going on? You need some advice or help interpreting a dream?*

*I did have an odd one about rabbits just recently. I can tell you when I see you. I need that signaling device Americut gave you. Do you still have it?*

*Finally getting around to punching him in the face?*

*Not exactly. We keep getting attacked by wanderers, and my recent dreams suggest someone is behind it. Have you dreamed of the undead wandering around lately?*

*Actually, I've dreamed of a different kind of shadow covering the land, but there's always this bright light trying to fight it.*

*Yeah, that's us. But we need more combat oriented spells, and the guild won't sell us any. Not without being members, anyway. But we thought maybe Americut wouldn't be so stingy.*

*I see. I do still have it. He sort of enslaved me, but at least he gave me something to do. Not that I would ever call him back, but I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it either. You want it?*

*If you don't mind. Obviously you don't have to be there when we talk to him.*

*He knows where I am. He knows I would just contact you if he tried anything too. But he hasn't. I think he's given up on me.*

*Don't sound so excited.*

*Like I said, he gave me a purpose. I wander the city but is that really any better?*

*You're welcome to come back with us.*

*Thanks, but no. I see you've found my replacement already.*

*She is not replacing you. Besides, why couldn't you both travel with me? You already said she's going to leave me in the end. It's not like you would be competing for me.*

*You needed someone that could fight. I would only hold you back at this point, believe me. Can you get to the fountain? I'll meet you there with the thing he gave me to contact him.*

*In a bit. We're currently in Silveria, it's quite a distance away. We'll head back there now though.  
I'll see you soon, then.*

"Okay, we're heading back to Farborough," Lysanias announced, getting up. "She'll meet us by the fountain."

"Back to the alchemist's lab then?"

"That's right." He got out three wards. "In you go!"

"Find the lines first," pleaded Everest.

"Very well."

With the lines discovered and his friends (both old and new) tucked away, he imagined the corner of the lab and drew on his spiritual power. Once again he shifted.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the lab came into view as he opened his eyes, and got everyone out of the wards. He introduced the alchemists to Elita, neglecting to mention she was a skybourne, simply saying she was a wizard of some skill. He kept it short, saying he needed to get to the fountain right away to see Amy.

"Can I come?" asked Elves, the apprentice.

Rick smacked him in the back of the head.

"Wait, I have lots of important mixtures to keep from exploding. Never mind."

"Is there much danger in that?" Elita asked, edging away from the table with all the flames going.

"Hardly," he barked. "These two are master alchemists. The day they screw up and blow the lab up, I go back to being a farm boy."

*If the whole lab blows up wouldn't you be dead?*

Amy wasn't at the fountain but must have been viewing it remotely, as it wasn't a moment after the group arrived the water was disturbed and Amy stepped out. Elita looked her over, looked down at herself, and then back at Amy.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Amy," she said, holding a hand out. In her other hand was a circular disk, about the size of an orange.

"Elita. *You're* the person they used to travel with?"

"That's me."

"Come with me for a second. You three, stay. Staaay. Sit. Good dogs." Elita pulled Amy to the other side of the fountain, then looked like she was urgently asking something. Amy looked back over at them, then shook her head. It looked like she was denying something. Elita pressed her, but Amy kept shaking her head. Finally it seemed Elita believed her, and both came back.

"Here you are," she said, offering the disk to them. "Just hold it and say 'conversation' to activate it. You'll be able to talk and hear Americut. If he's still on the other end, anyway."

"Oh, like my wards. Sure. Thanks."

"Yeah. Nice seeing you. And you Don and Everest. Take care of him, okay?"

"We will," they agreed.

With that she dove under the water and was gone again.

"That was abrupt," Lysanias grumbled. "What did you ask her, anyway?"

"Oh, just girl stuff," she replied with a shrug. "Nothing really important. So we going to call up this wizard or what?"

"Let's find a quiet place. In fact we could go back to the guild hall, that's pretty quiet."

"You think it would work there? What if he can tell where it's coming from? He would think it was a trap!" Everest suggested.

"Why would such an obvious location be a trap? It would be more likely doing it someplace else would be a trap, to lure him into a false sense of security."

"We could go up in the balloon, that would really confuse him," Don suggested.

"I suppose it's a good compromise," allowed Everest. "Doing it in some back alley would be just as bad as the guild building."

"And the forest is no better, how many people can you hide behind trees?"

"This all assumes he does know where the request is coming from. But whatever, let's head out of the city and I'll get the balloon out."

"What balloon?" asked Elita. "In fact what is a balloon?"

"Remember when I said our mode of travel would surprise you? I wasn't talking about the teleport thing, I was talking about... Now where did I put that ward?" He started patting his pockets.

"Don't tell me you lost it!" exclaimed Don.

"No, no, I'm sure it's here someplace. Did I put it in the book? In the dispenser? Let me think."

He continued to pretend ignorance as to where it was but when they got a fair distance down the road he pulled it out and let the balloon out. It was in the exact condition they had left it, and the four piled on. Don closed up the fire valve making more heat go into the balloon part, and it started to rise.

"You built a flying machine? With no wings? That is pretty neat!" Elita told them. "And I thought my glider was the ultimate in personal sky travel devices. Wait, did you cheat? Is it magical?"

"The fire is alchemical, though magic can do the same thing," Everest explained. "And the forward control is magical. Otherwise it's just a bag of hot air. Like my friend here!" He grabbed Don around the shoulders.

"That's Mr. Bag of Hot- wait..."

"No, you're still Don Bunny."

With the group in the air, Lysanias took out the disk and gave a bit of thought as to what he was going to say. "Okay, I'm activating it. Conversation." He waited for something to happen, staring at it. He looked to the others.

"You may actually have to speak," Don whispered to him, looking pained.

"Oh, right. Americut, if this is a good time will you speak to me?"

"Who is this?"

"It worked! I connected with him!"

"It did? I didn't hear anything."

"That's odd."

"Hello? Who is talking to me right now?"

"Sorry, it's me, Lysanias. We, uh, got you arrested for the whole magic thing?" He braced himself.

"Oh, you guys. Wow, didn't actually expect to hear from you. What, did you take Amy's magical object or is this something you're doing?"

"It's hers." *He doesn't sound too mad. Maybe this will work out after all.* "We need your help, if you're willing."

"If you can pay our price, I'm sure our group will do whatever they can for you."

"Really?" *Will I have to pay you not in gold?*

He laughed. "I can understand your skepticism. I don't hold a grudge, and if you're coming to me it means the guild has failed you in some way. The more people come to us instead of them, the better it is for us."

"You're not wrong about the guild failing us. We need battle magic, and they won't sell it to us without being a member. I can see their point but it's important. They just say 'rules are rules' and won't listen to the reason *why* we need it."

"Sounds like them. Tell me, where are you?"

"Ah, so you don't know? Near Farborough at the moment."

"Our network extends there. Tell you what, head into the city and find a shop on Telomere St called the red bobbin. Tell the woman at the front you're a friend of the red,

she'll take you to the back. I'll be waiting for you there, we can discuss exactly what you're looking for and what it's going to cost you."

"We'll be there shortly. Thanks for hearing us out."

"Anyone annoyed with the guild is a friend of ours," he replied with a laugh. "See you soon."

"We need to find the red bobbin shop in Farborough," Lysanias told them after breaking the connection.

"Got the balloon out for nothing," grumbled Don, redirecting the heat so it would land again.

"Hey, at least we don't have to go inside a ward!" Everest told him, poking him in the side. "Let's go!"

## Everything Can Be Had For A Price

When: Not long after

Where: The Red Bobbin shop

The bell above the door chimed as the group pushed it open, and the elderly lady behind the counter looked over at them. She was wearing a bright handkerchief on her head but the rest of her outfit was fairly plain. The suspicion on her face was clear, Lysanias knew this was certainly not the normal sort of group that entered her shop. Hu took a quick look around and as he expected, the place was dedicated to the art of the dress. Bolts of fine cloth were neatly arranged on shelves, while rougher stuff sat upright, rolled around sticks and stuck in barrels. There was lace everywhere, spinning wheels sat on a table near the back, while balls of yarn spilled from baskets sat wherever there was space. Spools of thread were neatly stacked by color on pegs hung on the walls, while example pieces swayed above rows of patterns.

"I really hope no dwarf saw me come in here," muttered Don. "I'd die of shame."

"Why?" asked Elita. "You wear clothes, don't you? Don't they often need repair? Perhaps you just came in for that."

"Have magic for that," he grumped. "Let's get this over with before someone glances in here and sees me."

"Better let me do the talking," she announced, stepping up to the counter. "Hello!"

"Good day. How can I help you... four?"

"Actually, we're..." she glanced around, making sure they were alone in the shop. "Friends of the red."

"Are you now?" She looked the group over critically. "What's the password?"

"Password?" all of them said. Elita looked back at the group who were busy looking at Lysanias.

"He didn't mention anything about a password," Lysanias protested, wracking his brain.

The lady scoffed. "You aren't *told* the password. You simply *know* the password. Quickly now, I haven't all day."

*Right, because it's so busy in here.* Lysanias considered, and decided this was some sort of puzzle he had to solve. *If they don't have a specific password, then perhaps anything will do? But something that shows I'm aware of what this 'friend of red' business is about. Just in case I overheard that phrase and are trying to get more information about what it means. What would a group like this want as their password? Oh.* It came to him in a flash, and really, it was rather obvious. "Down with the guild!" he said confidently.

The woman smiled and stepped out from behind the counter. She swept her hands towards the back of the shop. "Right this way, please."

The group crammed into a small room in the back of the shop that had no windows. Americut was standing there, and Lysanias tried not to scowl at the man as he entered. He looked much the same as when they had first met; portly, thinning hair, but at least he had a shirt on now. In fact he was dressed in wizard's robes, and standing before an odd break in the wall. Almost like it was made of two different kinds of stone.

"Hope we didn't keep you waiting long," Everest said.

"Not to worry, it's fine. Ah, you have someone new! I'm master Airlinis, wizard."

"Elita." The two shook hands.

"Nice to meet you. Powerful magic around you... Interesting." He turned to the others. "I see you didn't waste any time replacing Amy. How is she, by the way?"

"She's fine, thanks for asking," Lysanias answered a bit gruffly. Then he brightened again. "How's life on the run? Surprised you would come this close to where a major guild presence is."

He waved this off. "This location is protected against scrying magic. All the 'red guild' locations are. Plus, what makes you think I'm in the room with you?"

*Oh, are we talking to an illusion of some kind? Or is he projecting his presence with magic?*

"Red guild?" asked Everest.

"We can talk about that later, if you want to join. For now, Lysanias here said something about the guild not meeting your needs? Such a pity." He bowed his head in mock sympathy. "What can *we* do for you?"

"We just need more effective attack magic," Don told him. "Something that can take out groups, works against the undead, and hopefully could knock them out in case they can be saved later."

"Saved? Undead? Odd request. There are spells to knock people out, even spells to knock out groups. I would have to ask around if anyone's ever tried to use them on undead creatures. It might depend on the type of creature, actually."

"We need to know what help you can give us, and the cost," Lysanias interrupted.

He leaned back against the wall. "That depends on how much help you want from us. We could offer you a lot, more than the guild would. But of course that would require a larger up front demonstration of your... sincerity."

"How much is a lot?" asked Elita, looking past him at the odd slab he was leaning against. "We just need a few spells."

"If that's *really* all you need, I suppose a simple coin transaction could be arranged. However, membership in our "guild" has a lot of benefits. Take this portal, for instance." He indicated the area where he was standing. "Sort of dark in here, anyone have a light?"

Lysanias uncovered the pommel of his sword, lighting the space up. There were indeed two types of stone, one obviously the wall, the other a wall elsewhere. The wizard wasn't technically in the room with them, but rather in a room beyond this one, as though a hole had been cut in the wall. But he could see the wall past the hole, now that the room was lighter. "It's a hole in space," he decided, looking "behind" the portal. *It isn't a projection, it's really him. He's just not here with us. If this was a trick of some kind the hole closes and he's safe, possibly half the world away. Paranoia or genius?*

"It leads to a chamber where there are many more, all of them leading to the four corners of the land. Membership gets you access to them, for a start. It's blocked off now, standard procedure for meeting with potential new members. I'm sure you can figure out why. Also our complete spell library, and we don't charge for spells like the guild does. We think magic should be free for all who can use it. Even those with spell lens." He pointed to Everest.

"An enlightened viewpoint."

"Of course. Just because you weren't born with the spark, does that make you 'unworthy' to study magic, as the guild believes? We don't think so. We also offer knowledge. There are techniques to cut weeks off of fabrication or imbuing time, if you wanted to make some magical objects. Access to a lab, help with spell research, the usual guild stuff. We don't have as many members but we're a fairly close knit group."

"That all sounds fairly generous," she admitted. "I'm sure it requires a fairly substantial entry fee."

"You could call it that. Are you interested in hearing about membership?"

"How much of what you did to Amy goes on?" Lysanias demanded.

"I wonder," he answered. "I was one of the top provider of spells when she was, uh, working for me. So probably not very much. We're sort of like Fladdermus in that regard. We don't really ask questions about where things come from."

*Who? Oh, no, I remember. He's talking about that "other" magical guild, the research place. Don's talked about their reputation for pursuing magical knowledge with little regard for ethics at some point.* "I see," he said icily.

"She wasn't harmed. Quite the opposite, I brought her into the wider world. Gave her a purpose."

Don stepped between them. "You two can argue the morals of what you did later. Say I wanted to join, anyway. Lysanias should focus more on his supernatural skills anyway, and Everest is the least practiced at magic—"

"We offer training as well!" he brightened, remembering.

"The point is, this is mainly for me. What's the cost to join?"

"You must do two things," he replied. "The first, publicly humiliate the guild. Make them look foolish in some way, in other words. Shake the public trust in them, make their members' sanity be called into question. The more people see the guild as 'not playing with a full deck' the more they will seek out alternative sources for magic. That's good for us and others. Second, help a current member with something. There's a waiting list of things that need doing—oh, there's a waiting list for things that need doing. A member can put a request on the list and have other members help them out. See, I just keep remembering more benefits to membership. The mage's guild doesn't have that long a list, do they? Maybe I should write them down or something..." He trailed off. "Anyway, it's a 'group rate' so to speak. You all help, you all get in. I'm sure it would be easier, the more people you have in the group, to accomplish these two things. But if you really are interested in just membership for yourself, that's fine. The tasks are the same."

"Humiliate the guild?" Don asked, as though asking "chew my own hand off?" "You want me to get killed?"

"You'll just have to do something that can't be traced directly back to you," he explained. "Or use anti-scrying magic or pay someone to do the actual deed. There are ways to avoid even magical detection."

"I suppose. Do you have any suggestions?"

He shook his head. "I leave it to your imagination. It has to be a whole guild chapter now, not just a single person. Publicly turning a guildmaster into a frog is cute, but not really what we're going for."

"I see."

"At least they don't want anyone killed," Lysanias offered.

"Of course not! That would be totally against our policies," Americut protested. "The guild should fall because it's rotten, like a wooden tower that was never protected from the elements. Not because we simply killed the people at the top. We do that, nobody learns anything. Another guild that's exactly the same will take its place. We need to show the current way of doing things doesn't work and institute change. Over time, so people aren't resentful of being told a new way of doing things. If everybody says 'this way didn't work, let's try this way' it's more likely to stick than just one person at the top saying 'this is the way things are going to be.'"

"So you would have a kinder, gentler guild?" Elita asked, suspiciously.

"In some respects. Obviously you go around murdering people, it doesn't matter if you use magic or a blade, you need to be stopped. We wouldn't just turn a blind eye to magic used for crimes. Dangerous spells would be regulated, but not to the point the current guild does if the need is there." *Oh sure, you say that because that's why we're here.* "But to throw an example out there if someone needed healing we would offer it, for a reasonable fee, rather than demanding kilograms of silver at a time."

"If that's the pitch, let me have a few moments to discuss it with my friends and see what we want to do," Don told him.

"Of course. If you would like to step into the hallway it's protected too, I'll just wait here for your decision."

"Can't you just close the hole up for a few minutes?" Elita protested. "Let us have the room?"

He shook his head. "The hole is actually permanent, it's not easy to close. We block them off when not in use. It's far more hassle to do that than just for you to step into the hallway, believe me."

"The hall or here, it doesn't matter. Let's go," Don told them, stepping out.

"What did you think?" he asked, looking around at the others.

"I don't know," Lysanias told him. "On the one hand he's all, oh, here's the hand of friendship. We're a better magic guild than the mage's guild because we share and share alike. But watch out for the dagger behind my back because we do some shady stuff too, like enslaving people."

"Lad, the guild wasn't any better. If he hadn't been stealing magic, only visiting her for, you know, they wouldn't have cared in the least. They're just as guilty for not having laws against that sort of thing."

"That was just *him* though," Everest protested. "Don't let your feelings for this one guy blind you to what they have to offer."

"You're just after that training."

"I have to admit, that's a big draw. Where else am I going to have access to both training and spells for free?" He turned to Don. "You saw the spells in that unicorn's spell books. Wouldn't you like to know how to cast Mercury magic? She had a lot of useful combat magic related to that planet. Just what we're looking for!"

"It's tempting, all right," he admitted.

"But he wants to embarrass the guild! How do we even do that?" Lysanias protested.

"Very carefully?"

"That's not an answer."

"I don't know the answer, lad. There must be a way if others have done it."

"Fine. We'll need to figure that out before we can join anyway. Tell him we'll figure that out first and I'll ask the universe more about this 'red guild' as he called it. If I don't like what I hear we'll have to figure something else out. Do some jobs and get the money for a guild membership, I don't know."

"Plus the spells we'll want to buy," Everest reminded him. "They won't come cheap."

"No training," Don remarked. "No free training, I mean. Even guild members have to pay, though there is supposedly a slight discount for members."

"Okay, okay. One thing at a time."

"I'll go tell him, be right back." Don disappeared back into the room.

Now back at the inn, the group put their heads together to discuss how to proceed. Lysanias had gotten a "yes" answer to "If we join, can we trust the red guild to do for us what Americut said?" He had gotten no answer to "Is there a way to safely embarrass the mage's guild" but a "yes" to "Is there a method to embarrass the mage's guild where we wouldn't get caught?" So with a sigh Lysanias agreed to think of a way to do that.

"But I won't involve the alchemists or the elevator access Rick showed us," he told them. "I technically work for them, and betraying that trust would be wrong."

"No, I agree," Don answered. "Whatever we decide on has to be done outside the guild, as if we had no access. That will keep suspicion off us as well."

"If we can even think of something to pull off that they won't simply ask magic about and get our names in minutes," Everest grumped.

"One thing at a time, my friend."

"Here's an idea," Don put forward after about a half hour of thought. "I have this crystal in me, right? If I don't concentrate on it, normal people like Everest here can't see me."

"But wizards would be able to. They could when I stabbed you with it."

"That's the beauty of it. I'm thinking of you making some wards to duplicate the effect, and we use Elita's expertise in sneaking into places to hide them inside the robes of a bunch of guild members."

Elita's hands flew over her mouth. "They would look like they were walking around without clothes on," she gasped. "But to them it would look like everything was totally normal."

"And it wouldn't register to magical senses, so they would have no clue what was causing it, if they even figured it out."

"Would be a lot of work," Lysanias offered, thinking it over. "So much work. Making the wards, sneaking them into the houses of a bunch of wizards. Asking the universe which robe they would wear the next day. Sewing them in. Then repeating it a dozen more times. Remember, he said it can't just be one person, can we do enough in one night to embarrass the *entire* guild?"

"Note it down as a possible and we'll keep thinking about it. You could pick a date, ask what outfit someone was going to wear in three days, then two, then one as you made the wards and snuck them into place."

"What about a large scale theft?" Elita offered after more hours of coming up with and discarding ideas. "These wards you keep mentioning, could you make some that made you ignored by everybody? You could follow a mage up to the library, that way you didn't have to use the alchemist key. Then just quietly clean them out."

"That's an interesting idea for a ward, I'll keep it in mind, but I don't know. Thoughts?"

"From what I've read, usually invisibility type powers break if you interact with things," Everest told him. "I don't know if wards would be the same."

"I wonder how the library is guarded? Do they have guards on every row? Even if I became visible, I could clean out a row then put the ward back on to slip into the next row. It wouldn't be magic so no one would sense it."

"But there's the problem of them finding a bunch of spells missing and just asking magic who did it. They would get a name immediately. Your name."

"Oh. Probably true."

"There's another problem," Everest added. "Wouldn't they keep that sort of thing quiet? They wouldn't run to the town crier 'we just got robbed.' Of course not, they would hush it up to not look foolish that some thief got past their security. That's the opposite of public."

"I tried."

Another two hours later Everest spoke up. "There is one similar idea to Elita's theft plan. We just have to steal something else, something more public."

"You mean something from a museum?" Elita asked. "Pretty high security in those places. Believe me. How does that impact the guild?"

"No, no, I mean people. You know, a prison break."

"I think we're not going to think of anything today," Don protested. "Let's just keep thinking about it and talk tomorrow. Maybe Lysanias will dream about something relevant."

"Hey, what's wrong with that idea?"

"You want to break somebody out of prison? Are you nuts?"

"Not somebody. Look, Americut got put on trial, right? But he got away. There must be members of this 'red guild' who *didn't*. Let's bust them out. The guild won't be able to keep a prison break quiet. Not when the person they locked up is running around the world again telling everybody they're free."

"I suppose as long as they aren't violent criminals," Elita allowed. "I don't want to let murderers or worse back into the world."

“Agreed. See what Americut says, he said to contact him when we had something.”

“Very well.” Lysanias got out the disk and activated it. “Americut, if this is a good time I have a question for you about our task.”

“What it is?”

“Are there any of your group in prison right now?”

“Oh, good choice! Yes, in fact four people from our group are currently locked up. There would be significant challenges to getting them out, but you would be the heroes of the guild for years afterward. Our guild, not the other one. We should call ourselves something else, I should make a note of that. Anyway, that would qualify, I can’t imagine the looks on the faces of the guild members responsible when it got out they got out. You took so long I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to think of something but then you came up with that? You don’t disappoint!”

He ignored the flattery. “Are they all in the same place?”

“Oh yes. There’s only one place the guild puts people that can use magic. It’s an island off the east coast they made magically dead, so no spells will work. If that’s what you’ve chosen I can get you the details and at least a partial layout.”

“Magic doesn’t work there?”

“That’s right. Like the courtroom, you remember. Can’t use my trick this time, the whole place is covered by a similar spell. Cast over and over to cover the whole place. It works out better for you though, if you can break them out without magic, they couldn’t ask magic who did it.”

*Would my abilities work? There are still people with supernatural powers born into the world, like the alchemists. They wouldn’t just ignore that as a source of danger for breakouts. I’ll have to ask the universe.* “That sounds like a big draw for us. Okay, I’ll head back to the red bobbin if you have the information on the prison handy.”

“I can get it together in a few minutes. It’ll be waiting for you.”

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch.”

“Right.”

“Looks like we have our task.”

Back To The Air

When: After dinner

Where: Crowded into one bedroom at the inn

Lysanias spread the scrolls out he had picked up at the red bobbin and the others leaned over the table to look at them.

“So here’s a drawing of the prison,” he began, “which is apparently from before the fall. It was a prison originally, and survived the upheaval of the chaos moon fairly well. Because of course it did. The guild fixed it up with magic, then proofed it *against* magic. And yes, I asked the universe if my abilities would work there and got a no. Had to ask three different ways, but I managed it.”

“Then the plan is off,” Don insisted. “We can’t break into a prison without access to something! I was counting on you being able to use your abilities.”

“We didn’t come up with anything but this,” Everest reminded him. “Let’s at least look the drawings over and see if anything jumps out at us.”

“Elita can look them over, she’s the expert.”

“What? No I’m not. I’m a thief... I *was* a thief. This is totally different. For one the place is surrounded by water. My targets were specific objects I could see through windows of houses. I could be across town when stuff vanished. Or if the gang wanted to hit someplace it was a house full of stuff and I put magic on them to pass through the walls so they could unlock the door for me. How would we even get there? Are these rocks? Even I wouldn’t want to swim there.”

“We have a balloon,” Lysanias reminded her. *Wait, wouldn’t it have been easier just to unlock the door with magic? That seems the long way around. Guess she just never thought of it.*

“Which they’ll spot a kilometer away.”

“Not if we make it invisible beforehand. As long as we stay out of the dotted line here,” he indicated the circle around the island, “it should stay that way.”

“Still means swimming past the rocks and climbing the wall, getting inside past the guards, then rescuing these *four* people and getting out again.”

“So come up with a plan for each step. You didn’t just give up because something you wanted to steal was inside a house.”

“Right, I just wished it into my hands. This is a totally different thing!”

“We’ll at least look this stuff over,” Don promised him. “Meanwhile, I want you to ask the universe if it’s even possible for us to rescue these four people without your skills. Or if there’s some way we can counteract the spells and use our magic.”

“Fair enough. I’ll go back to my room and give it a try.”

“Good lad.”

So Lysanias went back to his room and settled on the bed, closing his eyes. *Can we rescue prisoners from a prison where magic doesn’t work without magic or my abilities?*

### *Anything’s Possible*

*That was clear enough, he thought sarcastically. But I suppose with explosives, and guns, and killing everyone else inside we could rescue them. So that wasn’t a fair question, and I apologize to whatever force answers me. I should have been more specific, like asking if we could do it quietly or without raising an alarm or something. Okay, how about his second question? Is there a way to use our abilities and magic inside the prison?*

...No

*Oh great, not exactly the best news. But that 'no' was somehow different from the other 'no' answers I've gotten. Like I wasn't asking the right question. Odd. Okay, is there a way for me to use my abilities inside the prison?*

No answer.

*Humm... Is there some object I can carry that will allow me to use my abilities within an area I normally shouldn't?*

Yes

*All right! Lysanias was pretty excited now. What is the object that will allow me to use my abilities where I normally shouldn't be able to?*

No answer.

Try as he might, Lysanias couldn't get an answer to that question and gave up after a half hour. He went back to the group, it now being more than an hour later. They were sitting there playing cards.

"Hard at work, I see," he said looking at them. "And why do you and Everest have most of your clothes off, Don?"

"Because Elita is cheating at this game somehow," he answered angrily. "I just can't figure out how. But I'm going to if it takes all night."

"You'll lose the rest of your clothes way before then. Just because I'm good at it, doesn't mean I'm cheating," she protested.

"Doesn't answer my question."

"We just made it more interesting, that's all," she said, smiling. "What did you find out?"

He shook his head quickly. "It looks like there's something that will allow me, and me alone, to use my abilities in the prison. When I asked about something for all of us I got a no. But I can't get an answer on what the thing *is*."

"Sleep on it and try again tomorrow," Everest suggested. "Now that we know that, we can put some plan together. We looked the information over, but it's mainly where the people we're supposed to rescue are being kept and such. There's guards along the top wall, but no specifics as to their movements. If you have your abilities it won't matter anyway. They'll be powerless against you."

"Unless they have similar objects that will allow them to do magic," he countered.

"Then you would have gotten a yes to that question, right?" Don asked. "We could have created similar objects and used them."

He considered, feeling that probably was the case. "I guess. I can't imagine what would work for me but not you guys. It can't be something only a progenitor can use, that wouldn't make any sense. I can only do what you all can teach me to do. Speaking of that, when can we talk about our first lesson?"

"When we're not planning a prison break, I suppose. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere," Elita insisted. "You'll get your training in my kind of magic. Beating the pants of these two, literally, is better than waiting tables anyway. I'm sticking around."

"I suppose it's too late tonight. You three have fun with your 'game.'"

"We could deal you in," Elita suggested, a twinkle in her eye.

"I don't need to ask the universe if that's a bad idea. I'll see you all in the morning."

"Spoilsport. Good night."

"Pleasant dreams," Don wish him.

"Informative dreams," Everest clarified.

That night, in the dream, Lysanias moved through a bazaar of wonders. Rings and wands, hats and shoes, vendors called from all sides to see their wares from the seven corners of the world. Glittering gems and fine silks were displayed while fine cheeses and chocolates sent their tempting aromas throughout the area. One man sitting on a strange looking animal was singing about “Arabian Nights” while a vaguely man shaped blue being in chains danced behind him. None of these things were *right*. None of them were what he *needed*. Finally he came to a stall with only one item. A gigantic wolf stood behind it, and Lysanias looked up and up at him.

“Hey kid,” said the wolf, looking down on him like one might look at a tasty morsel. “In the market for a new sword?”

Lysanias looked down at the table and there was a lone sword laying there on a red velvet pillow. “Can it help me break people out of a prison where powers don’t work?”

“Sure. In fact it’s been used for that. Probably more than once.”

“Then yes. Where can I-” *Wait, no, I can ask where it is. I just need to know something about it.* “Does it have a name?”

“It’s a pretty famous sword, it’s called-”

“Fenrir!” A voice called from behind Lysanias, and a man in armor stalked up to the table. “What are you doing? You can’t just sell my sword.”

“But he needs it,” Fenrir protested. “He’s like you. Always charging off to save the world. Like you were, before the change anyway.” He seemed sour about whatever “change” this had been, and Lysanias wondered how he could tell.

The figure shook his head. “Doesn’t matter, you know the oath I made.” Grabbing the sword up he turned to face Lysanias. His face was obscured by the helmet, which had great wings sweeping up from the sides. There were wings at the knee and boots as well, and the armor itself gleamed in the light. “This blade is forever beyond you. Don’t come looking for it or me. Come on pup.” The wolf, now the size of a normal wolf, scooted under the table and went to his master’s side.

“I tried,” he whined, looking back at Lysanias. “He’s always been a bit uptight about that sword, even before he got turned into that. I really thought he would go for it, you two seem very alike. You can’t say I didn’t try.”

Lysanias tried to go after them, but they were beyond his reach, and vanished.

“Tough luck,” said a figure in a long black coat coming up to him. The voice sounded feminine, and Lysanias turned. The bazaar had faded as he spun, and he now found himself in a dark alley. Strange metal buildings towered above him, and a globe of light hung at the end of a metal post. It backlit the figure, obscuring them in darkness. “All hope is not lost, however. While the original may be beyond your reach, the fake certainly is not.” The person opened the one side of their long coat and a sword, looking exactly like the one he had just seen, hung there. How he could see it clearly when the figure was an indistinct blur didn’t even cross his mind.

“What am I going to do with a fake?” he demanded.

“Don’t discount it. It’ll do what you need it to do. Do you want it or not?”

“I guess I have no choice. Who are you? Where can I find you?”

“I can’t tell you those things, you have to find me yourself. But I can give you a clue; Tyrfake.”

Lysanias awoke.

*What in the world?*

“Is it just me, or does that seem especially clear?” Don asked the next morning.

“You’re making the whole thing up, aren’t you?” Everest asked. “It’s fine if you didn’t dream about anything, we can still make some kind of plan.”

“I did, just as I told you,” he protested. “You believe me, right?”

up?” “No reason not to,” Elita agreed. “I assume you asked about it after you woke

“I did. I asked if a sword named ‘Tyrfake’ was real. I got a yes answer.”

“So we just have to track it down?” Everest asked. “Or did you ask about that too?”

Lysanias shook his head. “I wanted to see if the name seemed familiar to anyone. If it’s sitting in an arsenal someplace the name should mean something.”

“The wolf sounds familiar,” Everest admitted. “There’s only one wolf that huge, and the name fits. Fenrir. Supposed to destroy the world at some point, not that it hasn’t been time and again so how would you know?”

“Never heard of any giant wolves running around the world,” Don told him.

“Nah, he’s stuck in the demon world, I think.”

“What would an angelic being be doing with a demon?” Lysanias asked him.

“That armor must have been angelic, though I didn’t recognize it. Not that I saw *that* many angels before the flood. But no armor with that much of a wing motif is anything but angelic.”

“I have no idea. Tyrfake. There was a sword associated with Fenrir, but I have no idea what it was called. Any recent accounts don’t say anything about it.”

“Doesn’t matter. In the dream the angel or whatever he was took it. Only Tyrfake was in reach, according to the person that spoke to me.”

“You’re on your own, that name certainly doesn’t sound familiar to me.”

“Okay. I’ll go ask.”

*Where is the sword Tyrfake to be found?*

No answer.

*Okay, where would our group go to take possession of the sword Tyrfake?*

No answer.

*Odd. What is the last known location of the sword Tyrfake?*

*Entering Northbay*

*Ah ha!*

“Anyone know where Northbay is?” he asked when he returned to the group a half hour later.

“Condana, I think,” Everest told them.

“Oh, great,” Don moaned. “We don’t have the money to go there.”

“Why would we need money? We can just fly there in the balloon. Or is it too far away and we’ll need to take a faster ship?”

“Fast ship? I’m talking about just walking down the street. Entering a shop. Paying off ‘crimes.’ Everything costs there, it’s the home of the merchant’s guild.”

Lysanias waved that away. “No one will even see us if we do this right. I’m going to have to make a ward to keep people noticing the balloon on the approach to the prison. On the way there I can work on it and we can test it out walking around Northbay.”

Don looked sour, but agreed that would probably work.

“How do we get there?” asked Elita.

“My favorite way of all,” Everest told her, putting his head down on the table. “Travel by ward.”

"We can head back to the city of forgers, Dvergerforge," Don told them. "From there head directly south in the balloon. We'll have to keep an eye out. I don't know where exactly it is except someplace along the coast."

"That should give us plenty of time, you can give me some training on the way!"

"You're awfully excited about that."

"Of course! I can learn any skill, and I haven't learned anything in a while. I want to try something new."

"I suppose it's better than just sitting in the basket doing nothing. When will we leave?"

"Unless we need to pick anything up at this point, we can leave now," Don suggested.

"I want some more paper and ink, at the very least. I want that balloon plastered in protection and 'please ignore me' wards. One attack that threatened to knock us out of the sky was enough, thank you very much."

"I'm going to regret coming with you, aren't I?" Elita pondered.

"Not if you like adventure!" Don told her, whacking her on the back.

The group left town to find some ley lines and get inside their respective wards.

From Dvergerforge the group climbed aboard the balloon and started south, and Lysanias turned to Elita.

"Yes, I know what you want. Okay, I'm going to do the simplest magical effect I know, cleaning someone off. You can sense magic, right?"

"I can."

"Sense it out. I'll do it a few times, then explain what I'm doing, and we can go from there."

"Got it." Lysanias' eyes shone with excitement, he was going to learn how skybourne manipulated magic. Once again the extremely bright magical accompaniment to Elita's magic flared up, and she called out "Clean!" in a loud voice. Don got cleaner.

"Do that again," Don commanded, cocking his head to the side in confusion.

"I already said I would. Clean!" This time Everest got cleaner.

"Now Lysanias, if you would?"

"Sure. Clean!"

"Do you feel that, lad?"

"I do. It's very odd."

"What is?"

"How to explain..." He looked over at Don. "It's like magic itself is ignoring her, right?"

"Exactly. But then she manages it, and it rushes forward to do what she wants. That winds up making that extra flare at the end."

"What does it mean? Am I doing it wrong?" Her eyes darted between the two.

Don shook his head. "Impossible to say. Not without another skybourne magic user to compare against. I suppose when Lysanias here tries it we can compare what you're doing. See if he needs to call that loudly, that sort of thing. Give it a try, I guess?"

So he did. But manipulating magical energies in the way Elita did proved to be rather tricky. Don was able to help, explaining about something he called "raw magic" which functioned similarly. He didn't dare actually *demonstrate* the technique, as it always resulted in a backlash, but he was curious that the two methods were so similar. Both started teaching Elita how to sense magic, which allowed her to better understand what she was doing and then coach Lysanias more effectively. *Odd that she was able to do magic at all without sensing it like I do. But then, her magic comes from her own internal energies, like a natural magician. So I guess that makes sense.* Days past, with

the group stopping at night to give Elita instruction in how to fight with the daggers, while Don and Lysanias spared with the sword.

At last, a full week later, Lysanias finally managed to manipulate magic into producing the cleaning spell. It was a curious feeling, putting energy into the magic itself rather than his will, but that was the way her magic worked. He could feel it, pulling his spiritual energy away from him as he shaped the energies, so he let it take all it wanted. The sparkles of magic appeared and after he said "clean" in a normal voice, Don said he felt cleaner.

"The effects were far more muted," Everest critiqued after the excitement had worn off.

"I didn't have to call out as loudly either," he agreed. Then he blinked. "She was right."

"About what?" Everest asked.

"I can feel it. That cleaning spell, it's still in my head. That is so weird."

"You mean like a tune you can't get rid of?" Don asked.

He snapped his fingers. "Yes, that's it exactly. It's like a tune you can't get rid of." He looked around, as if it was in the air around him instead of in his own skull. "Now I see what you mean. Having a dozen spells bouncing around your head at once like this? It could drive you nuts."

"So practice just one that," Elita suggested. "One spell is as good as another doing it my way. You just need to practice manipulating your energy into magic and then shaping it the way you want for the 'spell.' It's strange, but at least you having the spell still in your head is the same between us. I don't understand why when we're casting in the same way now, the same 'spell,' the magic comes out so differently."

"You're right. There's one other thing I want to try when we stop for the night though. I want to try casting it on you."

"Why?"

"Before I use it on myself I need to know if it's something about you that caused this spell to go wrong, or just casting this magic on yourself makes it go wrong. That should prove it. And if I get dirty casting on you, I'll try it on myself and see if I get clean."

"I suppose it's a good spell to try, you can't kill yourself with it. I would hate to see you try to heal yourself, for instance, and just make your wounds worse."

So that night they tried just that, and Lysanias found himself filthy just as Elita as predicted.

"There was some kind of resistance to the magic as I tried to cast it on you," mused Lysanias. "But now for the final test. Cleaning!" He was fresh and clean again.

"So it's you," Everest exclaimed. "Does magic not 'like' you or something?"

"Did I do something to offend- what am I saying, it's magic."

"But it can answer questions. Show visions of distant things. What exactly is doing that? Could it somehow be more attracted to some while being less attracted to others?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to try a few more times, maybe we can figure out more about it."

"I don't mind, but why?"

Lysanias looked sour. "I just have a feeling it's going to be important somehow, in the future. Like we need to understand this in order to understand something we'll learn later."

"You're the guy who can dream the future and such. Maybe you had a dream you don't really remember?"

"Or it's just something the universe is subtly telling me." He sighed. "Amy might know, or be used to this feeling. There are so many ways to pick up subtle information out of nothing that she taught me. Either way I don't think I should ignore it."

“I don’t have to actually do anything, so cast away. Just don’t kill yourself.”  
He barked a laugh. “I’m sure I would pass out long before I exhausted myself to the point that was a danger. Here we go.”  
He cast again, and again found himself filthy. “Interesting.”

Robbery Gone Wrong  
 When: About a week later  
 Where: Above Northbay

With another week before they got near the coast, Lysanias got busy making more wards and sticking them on the balloon. The basket and underside where rain hopefully wouldn't reach were covered in armor and ignore wards, the latter keyed to allow the group to continue to see the thing they were stuck to. Having arrived at Northbay the group landed the balloon some distance away, put it into a contain ward, and then got ignore wards of their own.

"Not for me, lad," Don refused as Lysanias went to put one on him. "In case we need to actually talk to someone, I can do that. My own nature is good enough for now."

"Fair enough."

The group walked into the town past the guards, who should have simply ignored them. One guard looked at Lysanias, calling for him to halt and pay the 'entrance fee' for the city.

"Nice," Elita told him sarcastically. "Well done with these wards, do they even do anything?"

"You know they do, when I didn't exclude us from them they worked!" he protested. "I don't understand it."

"Hey, what are you shouting about?" asked the guard at the other side of the gate. "There's no one there."

The guard looked over at the other. "What are you talking about, of course there's someone there. Look!" He gestured with his spear.

The man's eyes swept the road. "No there isn't."

"Yes there- huh, that's weird." The first guard went to look at Lysanias again but then did a double take. "I guess there isn't anyone there. That's odd, I would have sworn..."

"You know drinking on the job is frowned upon. Especially if you're not sharing."

"I'm telling you I saw something!"

The group slipped past them while they continued arguing about it.

"That was odd," Everest remarked. "What happened there?"

"Maybe they aren't perfect yet?" Lysanias offered. He got out another ward and looked at it. "That one I put on myself was a bit shaky. I should have tossed it. Oh well, never mind." He slapped this second on himself just in case. "Anyway, now what?"

"Now we let our thief go to work," Don replied. "Lysanias never got an answer to where, exactly, the sword was so it's up to you."

"I think whoever owns it must have it someplace with anti-scrying magic going. It's the only explanation," offered Lysanias.

"Or you're just not as good as you think?"

"I do pretty well pulling answers out of nothing, I'll have you know. And I tried a few times every night, asking all different ways. It just didn't work."

"I was there. So our target is someone rich enough to afford that kind of magic, and moreover made permanent where they keep their treasure. We'll find the largest house in town and go from there."

This proved to be slightly problematic because many wealthy people lived in Northbay, so finding the "largest" house was a matter of perspective. As the group walked the streets they saw few others out, apart from guards collecting "road fees" from those braving the outdoors. It was somewhat creepy, just walking past them without being seen, as people usually show some sign of having seen another as they

walk by. No one sized up his sword, or leered at Elita. No one looked down on Don or stuck their nose up at Everest.

"This must be what being a ghost is like," remarked Elita. "No wonder they go crazy."

*The type that doesn't haunt you and keep trying to kill you for 'revenge' anyway.*

Eventually it became obvious that there was not one "largest" house and the group found a quiet place to make a new plan.

"Here's the new plan," Don told them. "Elita, cast that spell on us to let us walk through walls. We'll simply check the larger houses, one at a time, and meet back here in a few hours."

"Shall we split up?" Everest asked.

"Yes, cover more ground that way. You okay with that, lad?"

"It should be fine. You better take an ignore ward though, if the sword is owned by a wizard they'll see you just fine."

"Good point. Better give me two..."

"I'm telling you- never mind, two it is."

Lysanias then took a tour of the homes owned by the wealthy of the world, and was somewhat astonished by what he saw. Fine paintings, rugs, silverware, what were probably magical or technological relics on display, and more. Houses full of them.

*What's the point? These people have so many more resources than I do, but what does it get them? Do they really get more satisfaction from all this stuff than I do, fighting to save the world? Again and again. And again. Okay maybe they do.*

He saw his share of swords, shields, armor, and other weapons in collections that day. Hung on walls, set upon dummies, under glass display cases. But none of the weapons he saw matched the blade he had seen. *Tyrfake, where are you?*

It was the evening of the third day when the group got back together from scouring the town that Everest returned with a smile on his face. Rather than pay the high prices in town the group had been camping some distance off the main road near the town. Lysanias made new wards for them every night, and was starting to despair of ever finding this sword. He kept trying to ask questions about it, but got no answers. He only had one more dream about it, the angel (if that what it was) teasing him by holding the blade out of his reach while small winged creatures danced about his feet and chanted "use the fake" over and over. *Either that or "you're so fake" I couldn't quite make it out. Eat some cake? No, that would be a lie, there was no cake. You can't take? That would make more sense.*

"Think I found it," he excitedly told them. "Come on, I don't think the owner is home."

"It's about time," complained Elita. "You know how boring it is just waiting around for you guys to come back? Not being able to use that spell on myself is stupid."

The group, led by Everest, made their way to a rather large place and crept around to the bushes in back. There were guards walking around, most of these larger houses did, but Elita figured she could get the door open.

"Why do we need the door open?" Don asked. "We'll just walk in there and grab oh."

"Exactly. You have to have the spell off to pick the thing up. So I have to come in with you because at that point you're stuck in there. Don't worry, I did my share of breaking and entering before I figured out the magic to whisk objects to me."

"How did you do that?"

"Watch and learn." She pulled out a strange set of metal tools from her pocket and went up to the door. Making sure no one was watching she inserted a tool into the lock and started wiggling it around.

"You know how to pick locks?" Everest asked her, watching what she was doing. "I've read about that. I'd love to get your thoughts on the subject sometime."

The lockpick stopped moving. "Trying to concentrate," she hissed.

"Sorry."

She kept at it a moment and finally the lock clicked open. "Got it!" she exclaimed. "Let's go."

Trying to creep around the house silently Lysanias felt more exposed now that he couldn't pass through solid objects like they didn't exist. Everest led them through the house with confidence, past more opulence and evidence of wealth similar to other houses he had seen. He had come to the conclusion that, given these sorts of places were usually spotless, that they were not actually "homes" in the traditional sense. They were display pieces, to be shown off at parties, perhaps, but not really lived in. *A lived in house is chaotic, messy. With kids running around and people always wondering where they left something. This? Everything is arranged just so, the furniture hardly looks used. This is just a big doll house.*

"I think this is it," Everest told them, stopping in front of a door. "The sword is in a cabinet to the left of the door."

*That's right, it is,* Lysanias suddenly realized. *Somehow that sword is radiating spiritual energy like a ley line. Several, in fact. I can feel it right through the wall.* Everest pushed the door open.

Suddenly, there was a deluge of water from nowhere and the group was blinking and wondering what the heck was going on. *Oh great, that just washed away our wards, we're visible now. How in the world-*

"Well, well, what do we have here?" said a voice from behind them, and an odd looking woman stepped into view. She was wearing a fine dress with a low neckline, slit up the sides showing her long legs and odd shoes that seemed to force to her balance her heel on a slender point. They did make her appear taller, however. Her most striking feature was her long black hair that was waving about as if on its own. She looked beautiful and regal standing there, though her eyes were fairly strange and her hands seemed more amphibious than human.

With her were a woman dressed in wizard's robes and two woman with swords and breastplates, probably part of the city guard from the colors of their uniforms. The wizard looked rather surprised, while the guards just seemed ready for them to make a move.

"Uh..." said Lysanias, wondering what to do now. *We didn't really think of a story in case we were caught.* "We just wanted to steal one of your swords, if that's okay with you?" *Wait, why are you telling her this? Think before you speak, man!*

Elita seemed to be thinking the same thing. "What are you saying, you idiot? Don't tell her that!"

"Oh, I already knew about it," the woman said matter of factly. "Why do you think the water trap? Though I had my doubts when that funny looking person came and told me you would be coming. But they were right, and the water worked. Why water, if I may ask?"

"Wait, this funny looking person, were they a wanderer?" demanded Don.

"Why yes, I think that is what they're called. How did you know?"

The group shared a look. "Look, it's a long story, but the fact is we need to borrow- borrow- your sword for a few days. We'll be happy to pay you for the loan."

"My this is interesting. One of the three swords in that room, specifically? Now why could that be, I wonder? Shall we retire to the sitting room? Naturally I must insist you leave all your weapons behind, and that spell lens of course. I'm told the human male, that must be you, can do lots of things on his own but you strike me as being a gentleman. You won't attack me while I'm offering my hospitality, will you?"

*I don't want to attack you at all. You're not as hot as Amy was, but you're close. In fact with those shoes and your legs showing like that, I would say you're probably*

*more attractive than Elita, and I thought she was fairly good looking.* Lysanias looked over at Don, who shrugged. "Better than being arrested. Or having to kill these people. We could take them I'm sure, but I would rather not."

"Me too. I'm going to unbuckle my sword and set it right here."

The guard's grip on their weapons tightened, but they allowed the group to set their stuff down and walk away from it.

"Pity about the carpet," the wizard remarked.

"Oh posh, it's just water. The servants can mop it up."

"I was actually offering to clean it up for you."

"For a price, I assume?"

"Of course, I have to charge for magic I do."

"My servants are already paid for. Even I'm not rich enough to afford guild prices for every little thing. Come along now." The woman led them to another room where she gestured they sit. The guards took up positions nearby, and the wizard of course stayed right by the lady's side. She sat in a chair facing the others and settled her hair, it twisted around itself and became a thick braid. "So you're here for a sword that's in my collection, is that is?" she asked to get the conversation started again.

"That's correct," answered Don. "We need it to start a chain of events ending in us getting access to some combat magic so we can save the world from a horde of undead that Lysanias here has dreamed are coming to kill us all."

"Delightful," she beamed, putting her hands together. "A command performance. But why one of *my* swords, specifically? All are old, yes, but none have really displayed any sort of power. They just seem like regular old swords."

Don looked to Lysanias. "I have reason to believe it can allow my abilities to function in a dead magic area," he reluctantly told her.

"Is that so?" Her eyes widened. "That would certainly be valuable to the right people. Worth far more than what I originally paid for the sword itself. How did you know this? My house has permanent anti-scrying magic placed on it, how did you know it was here?"

"We didn't. We've been checking houses out for three days until we located it."

"Ah, so you know which one it is?"

"The one to the left of the door, under the glass display case," Everest told her.

"Go and fetch it," she said to the guard closer to the door.

"Mam, I shouldn't leave you," she protested.

"Just do it," she snapped. "I'm fairly sure that even disarmed, these people could cause me serious trouble if they wanted to." *True.* "But they sat down and are telling me what I want to know. Yes, they could be lying but all this to steal a sword? There's more to it, and I intend to find out what. Furthermore they are obviously not professional thieves, who comes in with four people to steal a sword?" *That was sort of stupid, she's got a point.* "They're a group of adventurers and are used to working together. Hence they stuck together for this too." *Oh. I suppose when you put it like that, it makes perfect sense why we stuck together. Huh.* "Then there was that mysterious wanderer who came to see me, then vanished again. What was that about?" *Hoping you would post a bunch of guards who might finish us off without them having to lift a finger, no doubt.* "They really do want the sword for some reason, and they did not immediately attack us when we showed ourselves. They have honor and integrity. If they can show it does what they say and we can work out a deal, the value of my collection rises substantially. For now let's see the thing."

"Very well." The guard reluctantly left, and Lysanias felt it moving through the house. He closed his eyes, feeling it out.

"Three. Two. One. Zero," he counted, and the door opened again to admit the guard. She was carrying the sword, which looked exactly like the one from his dream. It was a fairly unremarkable broadsword, though it looked slightly smaller than he recalled in the dream. She handed it over to the woman, who took it gingerly.

"I'm fairly impressed, or did you just hear her coming? No matter." She held the sword up and inspected the blade. "Thousands of years old and still looks as new as the day it was made. I always thought it was just a creation of the world before the fall, but you say it has special properties?"

"It radiates energy," Lysanias explained. "It's how I knew she was coming back. I bet I could tap into the energy and use it to power my abilities. But why it would work when anything else would be dampened is beyond me."

"Perhaps because of age?" she wondered. She gave it a swing through the air. "Feels lighter than I would have guessed. Still." She set it down. "What are you offering for it?"

"We don't have a lot of money-" Everest started to say. She laughed.

"Money? I have plenty of that. No, for the loan of something as special as this, I think I want something equally special." She was rubbing her hands together and smiling. "Like that spell lens of yours, or an object of power from before the fall."

"A spell lens!?" the wizard next to her gasped. She looked angrily over at the woman. "You wouldn't!"

"Why shouldn't I? I'm not in office, and I've got the money. I could go buy one myself. But these people who claim not to have much money seem to have gotten hold of one. So perhaps they can get one for me."

"The guild frowns upon them, you know."

"But they love my money, so they can frown all they want. Well, what do you say?"

"I have a counter proposal," Lysanias offered after a moment. "What about a unique item, made exclusively for you?"

She waved that off. "I could have magical items made if I wanted them."

"Not magic," he protested with a shake of his head. "Talisman, like the sword. An object utilizing spiritual energy."

"You can make those?" she asked, leaning forward. "That's a lost art, I've not heard of anyone making things like that anymore. It's all just magical objects."

"I know the theory. I haven't had the time to actually sit down and work on one, but I'm certain I could."

Her eyes narrowed. "And it could be anything I wanted?"

"Within reason. It would be limited to one function, putting more power than that would take more time than we have. Even just one is pushing it, but I can probably manage."

"The possibilities... Let me think." She thought for a moment. "Of course, how could it be anything else?" She took one of her rings off, holding it up. "Make this stop my aging process, and we have a deal. You can borrow the sword, and I'll want to know how it performs, of course. And if you can teach me to sense this energy it's giving off, I would be most grateful."

*I can teach her, if she can learn. As for the aging thing I'll have to research how to do that, I'm sure the book doesn't mention it. But it does mention it's not much different than making new wards. You just figure out what sort of spiritual energy pattern gives the effect you want, then bind that into the object. I'm sure I can do it, maybe with a bit of a boost from the dragonfly spirit. "I'll do it."*

"Wonderful!" She slipped the ring back on. "I'll have the servants clear a space you can work at in the basement. You can start tomorrow."

"I'll need various things, some of which I'm not sure yet. Paper and ink, to start." *I'm not using up my ward paper for this.*

"Of course, whatever you need."

"Then I'll be back tomorrow to get started."

"I'll expect you bright and early. Put the sword back and you can escort them out." She handed the sword over to the one. They all got up, and her braid went back over her shoulder without her touching it.

"If I may ask, your hair and your eyes..." Everest spoke up, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Yes, I'm a cambion," she admitted. "My father's side. My great grandfather, specifically."

"Ah, yes I thought so. I don't think I've ever met one. It was nice meeting you," he finished honestly.

"Aren't you charming?"

Lysanias looked over at him, unfamiliar with that term.

"Her great grandfather was a demon, in other words," he explained. "She has a demonic lineage, like us." He indicated Don and himself.

"Oh. True demons can still have human children? How extraordinary."

"Certainly," she agreed. "Several varieties of demons can sire humans. Succubi most famously, but kumiho as well. Oh yes, by the way, whom shall I tell my servants to expect tomorrow?"

"Probably just me," Lysanias answered.

Don rolled his eyes. "She's asking your name, dummy!"

"Oh! I'm Lysanias. This is Don, Everest, and Elita."

"And you must all call me Merlot," she said, offering her hand to Lysanias. "This is turning out to be the most profitable burglary attempt ever. I must thank you for it!"

*What a fascinating individual.*

A week had passed as Lysanias created his first talisman in the basement of Merlot's mansion. During that time he had also taught her how to sense energy, better manipulate it within herself, and view auras, as her supernatural nature allowed access to these abilities. She was thrilled, checking out other objects in her collection both on the premises and in storage for the telltale sign of supernatural power. Lysanias looked them over but wasn't sure how to tell exactly what they did, though he felt there must be a way.

"I'll experiment with them," Merlot told him. "You just concentrate on making my ring."

The talisman creation went smoothly, the book detailing various methods that could be used, personalized to the individual artificer. Lysanias had her buy or find various objects that represented longevity such as tree bark, turtle shell, and the hair of a newborn baby. These he crushed up, powdered, and sprinkled in various patterns around the ring as though he was making a ward around it. He worked for hours a day, getting everything just right so he didn't mess the thing up and have to start all over. That evening both stood over the final product.

"All that's left is the application of spiritual energy," Lysanias told her. "That will bind this pattern into the ring and make it work for you."

"How will I know all this," she gestured at the table, "is going to do what you say in the end?"

"Apart from you not getting any older? I guess you'll just have to trust me, given that will take years to prove. Besides, it should be fairly obvious. Plus you can sense spiritual energy now, can you not? Maybe not exactly what an object does, but that it has power at all. Why would I go through all this trouble making you a ring that, I don't know, makes you immune to fire when the same effort would be needed to make you immune to aging? Trust has to come from somewhere."

"I suppose you're right. You've given me no reason to doubt you."

*Apart from breaking into your house...* "As the ring is yours you need to be part of the final step. Put your hand over mine and I'll finish it."

"Very well."

Lysanias' hand went over the ring, careful to not disturb the pattern, and Merlot put her hand atop his. "Here we go." He sent spiritual energy into the ring, and thus into the pattern. It started glowing, and in a flash the ring sat alone on the table. He picked it up. "As agreed, one ring of longevity."

"I guess you weren't kidding, that was fairly obvious. I didn't realize the process would clean up after itself too. Where did all that stuff go?"

"It's been bound into the ring. Just as with my contain wards holding an object this ring now holds that supernatural pattern within it. This gives the object power."

"To actually see the process done," she said with a shake of her head. "I envy you, Lysanias."

"All it cost me was the loss of my entire world, every person I ever knew including my parents, and possibly the resentful wrath of the Allfather at some future time for not dying when I was supposed to."

"I don't envy you that much," she admitted. "But your work is done, so as agreed, the *loan* of the sword Tyrfake." She gestured and her personal guard, who had been keeping the sword nearby, handed it over to her. She handed it over to him.

"Don't worry, you'll get it back," Lysanias said with a roll of his eyes.

"I better. It'll mean you succeeded in this plan of yours and are safe."

“Oh, you do care?”

“Of course. Who is going to make me more talismans when you need to borrow it again?” She winked. “Now that you know it’s here I’m sure there will be other times you need it.”

“I admit, I’d love to study it, see if I can tell how it was made. It’s too bad it’s so old or I could watch the creation of it directly.”

“It’s yours to study, I don’t need it back tomorrow.” She paused. “The day after tomorrow would be just fine.”

“Guess I better get going then. Thanks for the loan.”

“Of course. Thanks for not attacking us when we surprised you. Hope you work out your differences with those wanderer people.”

“Me too,” he replied sadly. *And I hope the guild doesn’t give you too much trouble for having an object that greatly extends your natural lifespan. Even if it isn’t strictly magic, I don’t know their policy on that sort of thing.* “Me too. See you soon.” He closed his eyes, first drawing upon the sword’s power and then envisioning the alchemist’s lab again. He shifted.

The others, hearing his arrival crowded around him, and he held loft the sword that would allow him to use his powers anywhere.

“Feel the energy coming off it!” Elves breathed, looking it over. “Design is sort of old fashioned though.”

“If the styling was based upon the sword Tyrfing it’s no wonder,” Everest piped up, coming over. “I’ve been checking the local library, it seems the sword Tyrfing, once stuck in the mouth of Fenrir, sort of disappears from history several thousand years ago. Where this one comes from is equally a mystery.”

“I’m not surprised,” Rick agreed sadly. “So many records were lost in the upheaval.”

“I’ll ask around Heaven, next chance I get,” Lysanias told them with just a hint of sarcasm. “I do have to wonder though, if *Tyrfake* radiates this kind of energy, what did *Tyrfing* have going for it?”

“We’ll probably never know,” Everest told him.

“Agreed. So, let’s head to the island and let my people go! Just got to be free? Tear down this wall? You know what I mean.”

The prison itself was located far to the north east, in the sea of teeth. Ice and rocks plus the general storminess of the area made boat travel difficult. This didn’t bother our group as they simply sailed above the clouds most of the time, dropping below only where there were breaks to check their course. Lysanias spent most of his time preparing, making wards and going over the plan in his head.

The plan itself was quite simple. Get in without being seen, and get out without being caught. Anything else would have to be improvised on the fly, something Lysanias wasn’t too comfortable with given his failure to protect P05/YM01 from blowing herself up. So he ran through various situations in his head, trying to figure out what could go wrong. He would be alone there, but at least he would have his supernatural abilities.

Finally the day arrived, and the balloon stopped some distance from the prison. Lysanias could see the roof through his glass, and there were people patrolling back and forth, searching the sky.

“Shouldn’t they be searching the water?” Elita asked, concerned.

“Airships exist,” countered Everest. “Maybe they’re expecting a new batch of prisoners?”

“That would be good for us,” Don mused. “In the confusion of getting any new people settled, maybe the loss of four will go unnoticed for a bit longer than it otherwise would have.”

“Or the wanderers have gotten here first, like they did with Merlot,” countered Everest.

“What are they going to do? Lysanias will be totally ignored, he’s carrying enough of the wards to wallpaper the whole place.”

“She seemed to take care of that little detail easily enough. Another water trap and he could be mummified in the things and they would all go away.”

“Look, I’ll have my spirit out, I’ll have called the spirit of the dragonfly for help, I’ll have the sword. Whatever they throw at me, I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“I hope so lad. When are you going in?”

“Nighttime. If they’re asleep I can just put them into wards and won’t have to explain why I’m there. Not that they’ll be able to see me anyway,” he realized. “But they might resist it, which would be bad. So we’ll wait until the sun has been down a few hours.”

“Good plan. I don’t like that I can’t come with you.”

“Same here,” agreed Everest.

“I don’t like it either, but you all can’t draw from the sword like I can. That’s why only I can do this. I hook into the sword, I can use the energy it provides to power my abilities. It’s not ideal but at least it’s something.”

The hours passed slowly, Lysanias tried to relax but was pretty keyed up now that the heist was about to begin. *If they did set something up here I’ll have to be careful. Heavy blocks crushing me via a purely mechanical trap will be just as effective as anything else. They wouldn’t need to know I was there, it just triggers because of weight or something. But my spirit could deflect something like that, and I could teleport out... It’s useless to try and think of every possible angle, I’m just going to have to be careful.*

With the stars out and the sun gone for hours Lysanias drew on the power of the sword and teleported to the roof of the place. The guards were still there, looking around with their own telescopes, as if they could see the balloon with the number of ignore wards it had plastered to it. *Let the games begin.*

Lysanias began by heaving up on the stone roof he was standing on. Not to tear it up (which he doubted he could do in any case) but to steady it. He reached a hand down and willed a circle to be cut in the stone, something he could drop through. The stone held and he slowly lowered himself through the hole. As he dropped lower he slapped two ignore wards on the hole, one on either side. They wouldn’t last long in this area but hopefully long enough no one would stumble into the hole and either fall to their deaths or more seriously, raise the alarm.

*I’ve got to work out my priorities.*

The hallway that came into view was crawling with guards, and Lysanias’ breath caught in his throat. No one looked up or at him, so he was still safe, but *this many guards can’t be normal. I mean come on!* He slowly lowered himself and made sure to stick a ward on the piece of stone he was riding before stepping off. *At least I can be sure there aren’t any traps in the area. Not with this many guards.*

Gripping the sword tightly he made his way forward, careful not to bump into anyone. They were wandering around, and he saw more than one person in a cell awake and scowling at them, no doubt wondering what was going on. There was a door leading down at the end of the hall, which before opening he carefully checked over and sensed for magic or spiritual energy. Finding nothing he proceeded, slapping a ward on it before opening so it would be ignored for a few seconds and tearing it off just as he closed it. *First hurdle passed.* Now in the stairwell he silently called to his mountain spirit protector, getting its attention on the second try. It appeared, ready to protect or help as it was able. Lysanias could feel the energy flowing from the sword into himself and then into the spirit, and nodded. *This is going to work!*

He made his way down three flights and carefully opened the door, stepping into the hall. There were two on this level, so he carefully counted cells and checked the men sleeping there against the descriptions he had. Of course everyone here looked about the same by this point. Long hair, somewhat gaunt, scraggly beards. He shrugged and got a stone out of a pocket, holding it into the cell so no guard would see it floating about. *And there's a lot of guards on this level too. But no wanderers yet. Are they content to let others fight for their revenge now, given how we've hurt them every time they've come up against us?*

The rock gently floated over to the man, primed and ready to take in whatever it next touched, which was the man sleeping in the cot to the left. He vanished into the stone, then Lysanias brought it back, fingers closing around it. *One down, three to go. Oh, almost forget.* Lysanias took out a written note he had asked Don to write in Trade, and held it up. *Just in case someone finds some way to get past the anti-magic properties of this place and see me, this should explain. Would someone looking backwards in time see me, or would my wards still function? Have to ask Everest, he might know.* Having held the note up a few seconds he folded it back up and shoved it into his pocket. *Now for number two.*

The second went as smoothly, as did the third one level down. Lysanias crept down the stairs to the lowest level, cracking the door open after once again checking for any sort of magic or trap on it. Peering into the hall he saw a few things he never expected to see again- angels.

The largest of these was a serpentine form seemingly made of sapphire, and taking up nearly the entire length of the hallway. A multitude of small wings jutted from along the body and it rested upon four paws that could have come from a lion. It had a face like a mask, and was gazing at the door with interest. The creature was flanked by what looked like two figures with lion like bodies, but standing upright. Both were female and unclothed, and he could see serpent's tails gently undulating behind them. The one on the left had the face of a falcon, the one on the right a ram. They seemed more bored than anything. Lysanias froze. *What are angels doing here? Okay, I am breaking some people out of prison it's true but isn't this going a bit far? How in the world did-*

"I can see your guilt, progenitor Lysanias," boomed the throne. His eyes snapped up and the creature was staring right at him. "Guilt at having survived the flood, guilt over the nature spirit Amy, guilt over the death of the elf at your hand. Need I go on? My suggestion to you would be to return those prisoners to their cells and walk away from this place. All here have guilt enough to wallow in for the rest of their lives. That they are here is justice, make no mistake."

*Oh great. How am I going to get past that thing? And what kind of angel is it? If only I had studied them a bit, but who ever thought I would need to know anything about angels? I can't exactly try to talk it out of... wait a second.*

*Yes, I carry my share of guilt, he sent into the angel's brain. But I'm always trying to do the right thing, to make up for those that my actions have killed. I've saved countless lives since I've been awake. What grand schemes of yours have come to fruition? That's right, none, because most likely you've just been sitting around Heaven doing nothing.*

The angel reared up. "Do not presume to lecture me, progenitor. Your kind was consigned to oblivion for a reason."

*Yeah, because the Allfather screwed up and then had to correct His mistake.*

"You dare to-"

*Oh, was I speaking falsely? Did my words not ring true? He gave us choice, free will, then decided He didn't like what we were doing with it and we should be destroyed. Is that false? Is it? Did the rains that flooded my world and destroyed thousands of us look different from where you were in Heaven? Did the Allfather feel no guilt as thousands of us died in terror? He could have chosen to simply send us to sleep and never wake again. You think He didn't have that power, to show us that small mercy?*

*But He didn't. He destroyed us, along with innocent animals, plants, all creatures of the Earth in the most terrifying way He could. And for what? Is the world so much better now than in my time? I hardly think so! My world was lost for the one thing He gave us that even YOU don't have. Free. Will. Why give us that and then destroy us because of it? Tell me that, if you can. Because I'd love to hear your opinion, being all concerned with "justice" and the like. Where is the justice for me, for the death of my parents? My friends? Can you give me that? Can you?*

The angel had been lowering itself as Lysanias ranted at it. "No, it is true, what you say. I cannot. Even if it was long ago, the effects of the Allfather's decisions still shape this world. In this I cannot fault your words. But have a care, the Allfather's plans are not for even the likes of me to know, and not for you to criticize."

*Then let us return to the matter at hand. Let me pass and retrieve this fourth man. I don't know what you have been told but this is necessary. These men should not be here, they do not believe in the law the guild claims they have broken. I agree with them. Their being here is not justice.*

"That is not for you to decide."

*No? Then who? Was this law handed down by Heavenly decree? Or was it made by humans? Humans who get things wrong. It is up to other humans to try and set things right.*

"Those that make the laws must seek to change them."

*Those that make the laws are the ones with no interest in changing them, for they suit them and them alone. Can you really not understand this? Maybe laws in Heaven were perfect and crafted to last for all of time, but here things change. Believe me, they change. That means the law must change as well.*

"Respectfully, I must wonder if you have the experience to make that judgment. From what I understand you have not exactly been awake in the world long. Can you really claim to know what is best?"

He snorted. *Best? Perhaps not. But I do know the danger if my friends and I are not allowed access to the tools we need to stop the army of undead my dreams say are coming. These four men will guarantee us that access.*

The throne regarded him. "There is no guilt for breaking these men out of here. You believe what you are saying is the truth. But at the same time I have been tasked with guarding this place against your arrival. I will do what I must to see that purpose though. I'm sorry I could not convince you."

*I am too. But I am taking that last man out of here, if I have to go through you to do it, fine.* He cut off the stream of thoughts into the angel and considered his options.

The throne reared up as high as it could in the cramped space of the prison hallway. "You think you can threaten me? Have a care, progenitor. You are still mentally a child, even by the standards of your kind. I have existed since the beginning! My abilities far outstrip yours."

*Maybe, but you can't use them, so who cares what abilities you have? Besides, I'm not trying to kill you, just get past you. It's the fifteenth cell on the right from here, are you with me, spirit of the mountain?* The mountain spirit nodded slipped past him into the hall where it started to grow. *Then let's rescue this guy and get out of here.*

The spirit charged.

## Getting Their Reward

When: No time has passed

Where: Prison hallway

As the spirit of the mountain charged the angel to try and keep it from squishing Lysanias the two “smaller” angelic beings flanking it bent to pick something up. (Both were twice as tall as Lysanias was.) Lysanias started forward, and they were vaguely glancing in his direction. *Can they somehow sense where I am as well? Argh, there’s just too many powers in the world to account for all of them. I guess you can’t turn them all off, if they aren’t a supernatural or magical “ability” just something a creature like an angel can do. What are they holding? You can’t be serious.* It was buckets of water, one for each of them, and they looked to the throne.

“Not yet,” it cautioned them. “I’ll show you where.”

*Kind of makes me wish I could control water instead of rock. Still, how hard could it be to not get splashed from a bucket?*

The spirit and the angel crashed together, the throne simply trying to swat the spirit out of the way. Lysanias sent it energy from the sword as it ducked past the paw and tried to restrain it. The throne seemed to radiate surprise as the spirit got ahold of it and pushed it back up against the wall.

*So much for the mighty angel. It underestimated me. But don’t make the same mistake I’ve got a long way to go and it could still be dangerous.*

The spirit dug in, changing its stance to hold the angel in place. But neither energy from the blade nor the stronger stance helped as the angel roared in frustration and broke free again. *Ah, see, told you.*

“He’s heading down the hallway to your left!” shouted the throne, and the two sphinx readied their buckets.

*Or am I? I want to be there!* Lysanias shifted, teleporting past them in a burst of air. He was still moving, hoping he could catch himself in time but went sprawling. *At least no one could see that. And I didn’t impale myself on my own sword, and actually kept hold of it. So I’m one for two?*

The spirit tried to pin the angel again as it wildly looked around trying to figure out where he had gone. It was writhing around and the spirit couldn’t get a grip on it.

“If I had my powers this would be going very differently, I’ll have you know!”

*Yeah, yeah, tell it to someone who cares.* Lysanias started getting up, noting that the prisoners were all up and looking at the angel. *Can they see my spirit? Seeing something that’s not seen by normal people isn’t an activated ability after all.*

“There you are!” The angel lunged for him and the spirit tried tackling it to the ground. It just managed to get hold of the angel’s body and deflect him enough to keep from crushing Lysanias. The two went back and forth, the spirit’s superior speed keeping it just ahead of the much stronger angel, so neither gained any ground. Lysanias was finally up again, on his feet, and counting three from the end. As with the others the man he was here to rescue was craning his neck to see what the heck the angel was doing out there.

“He’s in front of the man now, throw the water at him!” commanded the angel.

*Oh yeah, those two.*

Wings shimmered into existence on the back of both sphinx and they basically shot forward, buckets ready. “Deflection!” Lysanias called as both let the water fly, casting in two places figuring there were two buckets. The water bounced off the magic as the sphinx flew by, and Lysanias breathed a sigh of relief. *So that worked.*

“That was magic!” exclaimed the man in the cell. “If there’s someone there, get me out of here!”

*I plan to, Lysanias sent into his brain. Don’t resist this and you’ll be out of here in a moment. I’m... putting you in my pocket dimension.* Of course he wasn’t, but that was

the closest analog in magic he know about so the man would be familiar with it. Lysanias grabbed the forth stone from his belt and didn't need to do more than touch the man with it, he was right there. He vanished into whatever space wards created.

*Thank you spirit, once again you have proven invaluable.* With that, Lysanias envisioned the balloon, drew off the sword and shifted again.

The basket wasn't moving so this trick would work, and Lysanias found himself back there. This somewhat unbalanced it so it took a few seconds for the rocking to stop. Lysanias was holding the edge of the basket, but once it was steady again started shouting "Come on, let's go. Get the balloon moving!"

"What's the rush?" Don asked. "You got away, didn't you?"

"Did you get them?" Everest asked.

"Of course I did. Come on, we've got to go!"

"Why?"

The enormous throne smashing out the side of the prison and rising into the air screaming "Lysanias!" answered their question. All four stared.

"That's a throne!" exclaimed Everest. "I've seen pictures in books. They had a throne guarding the place?"

"You and your books," Don disgustedly spat. He started the balloon moving while the throne was in the air, turning and trying to see if they were still nearby. The two sphinx shot after it, helping to scan the skies. "I don't suppose they told you what to do about one?"

"Run away!" he suggested.

"This thing manages a brisk walk, that thing looks really fast! It's got dozens of wings."

"There you are!" it screamed, orienting on them.

"So much for your wards!" complained Elita.

"It can sense us somehow, see our guilt or something. It can't see us directly," he protested. "It's going to attack, deflect it!"

The gem in the center of the throne's crown glowed and a brilliant beam of energy shot out it towards the group. "Deflection!" the group cried, their massed magic combining again to harden the air and protect the balloon.

"We almost lost it," Don told him. "Do something."

"Little help here?" Everest said at the same time to Elita.

"Oh, I could probably manage that spell, it seems fairly useful."

"Much more useful than being dead!"

"What do you want me to do about it? I can't lift *you* and teleport, much less this *entire balloon.*"

"I don't know."

"It's trying again!"

"Deflection!" Now four different people, using three different ways of manipulating magic called upon it to knock the beam of light aside. Once again it held, and as it cleared the two sphinx came nearby with their buckets, tossing water around and refilling them from the water below.

"What are they doing?" Everest asked. "Making it rain? Or a light drizzle anyway."

"Trying to wash our wards away, of course."

"You can't stop my blasts forever!" cried the throne.

"Attack it, Elita!" insisted Don. "Drive it off."

"I'm not attacking an angel, even if it was in range."

"Everest, Lysanias, maybe some spear action?"

"Are you crazy, the Heavens already don't accept my kind, you think I want to make matters worse by- whoa."

Another brilliant beam shot out, but luckily it was nowhere near them. "Blast it, where are you?" screamed the throne.

"We have to do something!"

"Guess it's up to me. Grab my arm and don't let go," Elita told them. The group did as she asked as she grabbed one of the ropes holding the basket to the balloon. "I hope this works," she muttered. "Become as a ghost!" Magical energy sparkled around the group and faded.

"Did it work?" asked Everest. "I don't feel any different." He held his hand up to his face, as if he expected to be able to see through it.

"Let go and find out," she smirked. "You'll fall into the water so that should prove it to you nicely."

"I'll pass, thanks."

With the group and the balloon now out of phase with reality the attacks of the throne passed through them, and of course the water the sphinx where tossing around did as well. Without warning all three vanished.

"They weren't physically here?" Everest decided. "Must have been brought here temporarily, maybe with magic? Though I've heard rumors of people that could actually summon them here with spiritual energy. Demons too."

"And by rumors you mean you read about it?" Don asked him pointedly.

"Maybe."

"I've ended the spell, you can let go now," Elita told them. "Don't all thank me at once."

"Thank you, Elita," the other three intoned.

"That's better. Say, you said you got them, right?"

"All four, right here in the stones," agreed Lysanias.

"How long are they in for? I mean another four guys in this basket is going to be a *little* crowded. Not that I would mind, necessarily. If they were hot."

"They've been in prison for months. And they're all scrawny wizards."

"Not hot then. Never mind."

"Did they have beards though?" asked Don. "They probably would, right?"

Lysanias ignored the question. "You're right though, I better take them back. Stop the balloon so I don't splat myself. I might not have the energy to come back right away."

Don shook his head. "We'll make our own way back. You get things squared with Merlot and the 'red guild' and we'll meet up with you in Farborough."

"Wait a minute." Lysanias got the disk out he used to communicate with Americut. "Maybe there's another way... Conversation. Americut, if this is a good time?" he whispered, in case it wasn't. *May as well be polite about butting into his life unannounced.*

"This is fine, how are you doing?"

"Great, just great. We have the job done, is there any way to get our balloon back faster?"

"You got them out? That's wonderful. Stay where you are and give me five minutes or so. You'll know when the time is right."

"Great! Thanks."

"Of course. See you soon."

Lysanias put the disk away and the group waited.

"What do you think they're going to do?" Everest asked, looking around.

"Probably magic," Don told him. Everyone looked at him with a disgusted look on their faces. "What?"

Several minutes later a hole opened before them, and Americut beckoned them through. Don lined the balloon up and smoothly passed through it, and it closed up behind them. Looking around they were in front of a cave of some kind, high in the

mountains. "Welcome," Americut said to them. "You should have room to set down, yes?"

"I think so," judged Don, and got the balloon settled. Lysanias took the four stones out and released the captive men, two of whom were still asleep. They were somewhat surprised to be woken up as free men, and all were quite thankful and shook the group's hands multiple times. Finally Americut shoed them off, into the cave to get cleaned up.

"Congratulations," Americut told the group. "You really pulled it off. I didn't think it was possible. We'll inform the criers right away, and by tomorrow this news will be all over the realm. Our group owes you a great debt. Still, there's one more task you'll need to do before you can officially join. Help a member out. I have the list right here—"

"Now just a minute," Elita fumed, stepping up to him. "By my count, we just helped out *four* people. We don't have time to jump through your hoops anymore. We risked our lives getting those men out because they were guarded by an angel. A throne, have you ever seen one? It's enormous. Plus two smaller ones, all that you didn't tell us about. So we're members, or those four can go right back where they came from. I doubt they've gone far enough that we couldn't get them back here by magic." She raised her hands.

"Now now, let's not be hasty," Americut pleaded, holding his own hands up, palms towards them. "You make a good point. I didn't think about you doing both tasks at once but I guess we could say you have. Why not stow the balloon and I'll show you around?" He asked the last rather hopefully.

She stared him down for a few more seconds. "That would be acceptable."

She turned to the others with a smile and a wink and they tried not to laugh as Lysanias put the balloon away. Moments later they were walking through the cave and into a system of carved out tunnels and rooms where a few people were hanging out doing things. They passed a library where two people were studying magic, a printing press room, a lab area, cots, kitchen area, finally ending up in a room with a table where he got them some refreshments and had them sit. On the tour he had gathered several things up and now spread them out on the table.

"Welcome to the RED guild," he announced when they were settled. "That's Resist Eventual Destruction, in case you were wondering. It also helps identify our safe houses. In every major city is a shop with 'red' in the name, like the red bobbin. These are linked through our teleportation system so you can always get to one city from another fairly quickly. But I can tell you about that later. Have a membership card." He slid each of them a metal card, red of course, that was blank. "It's made of several metals joined together, you can tell with a magnet. I'll show you how to tell a real card and get you a magnet later, if you don't have one. Now, you wanted some attack spells, right?"

The group nodded.

"Fine. You saw our printing press. This is actually just one of, oh, a dozen or so locations that are pretty much the same. Not even I know all of them, and some are only known to a few people as a security measure. Each has a 'backup' if you will of our entire spell library, so you can go to any one and get the same spells. Before you decide anything though, there are some spells I'd like to share with you. They relate to various guild secrets, and could influence what preparations you decide to make from here. Take a look." He passed around several sheets of paper and the group looked them over. Elita's eyes especially got wider as she looked them over.

"Now, these spells are only the most useful to natural magicians, that is, people who can spend their own energies to power their magic. Can any of you do that, or are you all considered scholars?"

"We can cast with energy," Lysanias told him, indicating himself and Elita.

"Splendid. This relates to the first thing the guild doesn't want you to know. We all know they don't like spell lenses," he pointed to Everest, "because they think it's

'cheating.' Despite the fact lenses have to work harder to cast magic that way. But why do you think they don't like natural magicians? The answer is here, in these two spells. Why don't one of you explain, and I can tell you if you've got it right?"

"From what I read here," Everest spoke up, "this spell will allow a person to use all their energy in one big burst, far past their usual limits. As a 'natural' as you call them can make up for a lack of skill with their body's energy they could do one spell a day far in excess of normal human limits."

"Exactly. Keep going."

"This spell," Don picked it up, "seems to indicate it can grant a person skill in something beyond human limits. It also relates to the skill of the person casting it. A person that is better at casting the spell increases the skill of the person they are casting on to a greater extent than a person less skilled at casting the spell."

"Exactly. Put these two spells together and you have something fairly special."

"A way to make any person's skill exceed that of a master for a short time," Elita reasoned. "By many times, if they use this third spell to drain other people of their internal energies before doing all this."

"Correct. And here we have a man who can do various things, such as make wards. Perhaps he would like to make a few for emergencies that far exceed what would normally be possible for him?"

"He would be the logical recipient," Don agreed. "Given it seems you can't increase skill at casting spells for some reason."

"The magic doesn't seem to take if you try," Americut agreed. "Almost if it knows what you're trying to do. No matter, it can be used to increase skill at fabrication or imbuing, if you wanted to make a few things. You can make spell casting foci that increase your apparent skill when they are worn. It would work out to be the same thing."

"I might be interested in something like that," Don admitted.

*From sensing her out, Elita has the most energy of anyone in our group. It might be the only thing they can do all day, but if all three of them donated their energy to me and I cast this skill augmentation spell on myself I could make a number of talismans in a day of unmatched quality. They seem easier to make than a similar magical item, given what little I know about magical ways of doing the same thing. They really are giving us the tools we need, and the guild would have simply ignored this entirely. Again, maybe I can see their point but this is big! For them to hide such spells, such concepts, away from people is almost beyond belief.*

"You can take copies of these spells, we have plenty. And then there's this one." He slid another group of papers to everyone and they looked it over. "The guild would have you believe that to negate a spell, you have to precisely cast the opposite one. For example, someone casting degeneration on another to make them waste away can be stopped by casting regeneration on that person. The original spell simply vanishes as the two cancel each other out. While this works, it is also a lie. This spell proves that."

"This doesn't seem perfect though," Don spoke up. "It can suppress something, yes, but if the original caster doesn't let go of it, as soon as you let go of the suppression spell it'll come back."

"True, I admit it's not perfect. But if you are being attacked with magic, say from an elemental spell that cannot be maintained, would you rather have to know the exact opposite elemental spell to protect yourself or this one spell?"

"Given how many elements there are, probably this one," he grudgingly admitted. "And I do know how to cast Neptune spells, so I wouldn't need training for it."

"As with the other, the spell is yours. Now, let me show you how our teleportation system works. It took some creative spellwork to make happen, but again it's something you won't see the guild taking on. Might make lives more convenient for non-mages, after all. Come."

The group followed him down to a room full of holes in the air, each secured on either side by a large stone “vice.” He nodded to the guard that was there, a wizard at a desk reading a book of some kind.

“As you can see, the metal disk below each hole is what holds the spell. That way if a location is somehow compromised, the holes can be deactivated and moved on short notice. The stone of course makes it more difficult to get in here, and gives warning if someone unauthorized tries. The person at each RED location knows how to contact the person on duty and get the stones moved. You don’t need to know that so don’t ask.”

“Fair enough. More importantly there’s a spell that can make a hole in the air?” Don asked, impressed. “And you can just step through to someplace else, like Lysanias can teleport himself? Need to get a copy of that one too!”

Americut laughed. “It’s fairly useful, but also fairly useless at the same time. Allow me to explain. The spell is worked out to be used at sight range. In other words, you have to be looking both at where you are, and where you want the other end to be. This is, as you might imagine, somewhat inconvenient.”

“You must have worked around it somehow.”

“We did. While this spell falls under the domain of Mercury, grade 5, there is another spell that falls under the domain of Pluto, grade 10. That opens a similar window one can look through, but it only requires you be familiar with the location. It wasn’t used here because it’s only one way, meaning we would have had to do it twice rather than once.”

“So you used a grade 10 spell to see the location, then cast the grade 5 spell by looking through it, and then made it permanently bound to the disks?” Everest asked. “That seems like a lot of work. How long have you been doing all this?”

“Oh, several hundred years, as I understand it. RED has been around nearly as long as the guild has. After all, as soon as you have people with one opinion, you have people with the opposite opinion. We’re so small and have to stay so hidden it’s tough for us to influence them. But we do what we can, sometimes sacrificing a pawn, that’s me, in a trial to raise awareness. We’re playing a long game, making sure if and when people turn against them, a new system can be put into place to replace the old.”

“It doesn’t hurt that most of you are probably immortal,” Lysanias told him.

“Now what gives you that idea?” he asked, feigning offence.

“It just seems like something a group of magic users would do. Make sure they could be around to see the fruits of their labor.”

“And speaking of labor, hopefully this all has given you some ideas? We also keep records of what other people have made in the past if you’re interested. I need to get back to my own duties so you’re welcome to rest up, read up, whatever you want to do. You are members now, so our facilities are open to you.”

“Let’s get to work,” Lysanias told the group, who nodded. *Because who knows how much time we have, or when we’ll be attacked again. And yes, all this has given me some ideas...*

Despite wanting to get started right away Lysanias simply made some notes and took a cot along with several other people there. The jailbreak had happened rather late, after all, and he had done more than his share of running around. The next day he got up to find the others doing their own thing, Elita reading the titles of spells for ideas, Everest training with someone, Don studying various knockout spells to see which he wanted to ultimately learn.

“And what’s your plan for this fine day?” Don asked him, seeing that he was up.

“Hopefully start, and finish, a talisman for myself. It will take some research of course, and I’ll have to ask some more experienced people if it’s possible, but I got the idea last night.”

“Cooking up something big?”

“You know in my dream I was making people disappear?”

“You mean rabbit you?”

“Yes, rabbit me. What about that spell Americut was talking about, that makes a window someplace you’re familiar with? And I know Elita has a pocket dimension, it’s how she carries stuff around. What if I put the two together?”

“Hard to get anyone out of it,” Don admitted after a moment.

“That’s the part I’m stuck on, as well. That’s what I hoped to ask about.”

“People seem to come and go here. There should be someone in the lab or spell room you could ask.”

“Don’t suppose you would, uh, like to come with me?”

Don shook his head. “You really need to learn to talk to people on your own, lad. But sure, I can take a little break.” The two walked through the tunnels and Lysanias snapped his fingers, going past the lab and the library area down to the place where the portals were kept. There was a woman there now, and she looked up at their approach. Lysanias saw she was young looking, probably not thirty, with short blond hair falling to her shoulders. It was pulled back in a small tail, and she wasn’t dressed in robes, but rather a skirt and blouse.

“Hello there,” Don greeted her. “Don Fortress, new member. Helped rescue some people, how are you?”

“Oh, that was you? The whole network is buzzing about that, how some people staged a jailbreak. I’d love to hear about it. Or do you need to use a portal to someplace?”

“Nope, got dragged down here for some reason maybe my friend can explain. As for the breakout, not really my story to tell, it was Lysanias here that did most of the work.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said, holding a hand out.

“Thanks, you too,” he managed, then quickly went on. “I actually have an idea for something I wanted to talk to someone about. Figured guard duty was fairly boring and maybe the person in charge of the portals would know best.”

“Oh, I’m no expert,” she told him. “I just respond to requests that come in. But I’d be happy to talk. Guard duty is pretty boring.”

“I’ll leave you two to it then,” Don told them. Lysanias looked at him, giving a little shake of the head. His eyes pleaded for Don to stay. “See you later!” He grinned and walked off.

*I’ll get you for this. But I do need to get over this shyness or whatever it is.*

“So, you’re the big hero?” said the woman. “I’m surprised anyone could get in and out of that horrible place without magic. However did you manage it? Oh, I’m Aama. Aama Dalla.”

“Lysanias.” *Might as well tell her, there’s no harm in it. And I do want her help.* Lysanias told her in broad strokes about finding an object that would let him use his abilities near the prison, and that let him do the rescue.

“That’s really something,” she told him when the story was done. “A real angel and everything? You hardly ever see one, that’s so weird one would be there. Anyway, you said you wanted some advice?”

“Yes, about a ‘magical’ item I want to make. Something that can make people disappear, or at least take them out of a combat without hurting them. I wasn’t sure how before but Americut gave me the idea last night. That spell that was used to make these, the one way one.” He pointed to the stone “vices” and the portals inside them. “Put it onto a shield and anything that touches it gets brought elsewhere. I thought maybe a pocket dimension, but then what would be the easiest way to get them out?”

“You don’t want a pocket dimension,” she told him with a shake of her head. “You want a *personal* dimension. I can’t leave here but if you go up to the spell library someone can get it out for you. We can look it over and I think it’ll suit your needs perfectly. If no one is there look under Pluto, fairly high grade.”

“Personal dimension? Okay, I’ll be right back.” He jogged up to the library and didn’t want to bother the person reading there so he poked around until he found it. Taking it back she spread the pages out on the desk.

“Yeah, this would work,” she decided, looking the description of the spell over. “You cast this and the first time you get your own playground world. It can have rivers, mountains, castles, villages, towers, forts, anything you can imagine. They say you should sort of draw out what you want, at least as a sort of big picture view because it can’t be changed once you create it. So better to stuff as much stuff inside as you think you might ever want. Big, open spaces and empty libraries and workshops and everything. Then when you cast it again it sort of opens a hole in the air to where you first entered the dimension. Now, the spell we use to make these gates and see where the other end goes? It can go to other dimensions so you can stick the end into your personal dimension once you get it up and running. Anyone that hits the shield would be sucked in, and you can let them out later just by letting them walk out.”

Lysanias was thrilled. This was exactly what he wanted. It was enough space to hold the sort of force he saw attacking the bunnies in the dream, plus he could carry stuff around in it like the balloon, just by flying past the opening created by the spell. It was something he was sure to use all the time so having it bouncing around his head was no problem, and it could serve as a refuge by having his own castle right there inside? “This is really great, thank you for suggesting it,” he gushed.

“Glad I could help,” she replied with a smile.

Lysanias went and got some paper, jotting down ideas and sketching things out. Then he paused and went to look for the others.

“Hey Don, thanks for leaving me alone with her.”

“Not a problem lad. Did you two have fun?”

“She got me what I needed. Say, if you could design your own world, what would you put in it?”

“Thinking of becoming a god? It’s a little early for that yet I think.”

“Could you just answer the question?”

“All right. What would I put in it?”

“You know, apart from the normal stuff like rivers and streams and castles.”

“Lots of tunnels, big open caves. Oh, plenty of space for practicing spells and fighting. All the tunnels would glitter with gems of every size and description, and the floors would be solid gold.”

“Sure, why not? Anything else?”

“That’s about it, I don’t know. I can design you a shield or a sword, not a world.”

“Great, thanks. And don’t worry, I’ll be asking about a shield soon enough.” He next found Everest, and posed the same question.

“I would start by making a huge stone slab, supported by four great pillars at the corners. These pillars would look old and about to crumble at any moment. They would descend into darkness, making those brave or foolish enough to draw near wonder what the slab rested on. At the edges I would put a natural maze of dead hedges, trees, vines, lit by a blood red moon that cast a baleful eye upon those that dared to trespass.” As he said this he traced an arc through the air with one hand, looking off into the distance. “Only a few stars would shine in the sky, making this place seem old, old beyond mortal knowing. Further towards the center life would start to flourish, as dry, dead grass gave way to green as a great ball of light, set in the very center of the slab, touched and nourished it. Here would live hope, the only light of the land. Dwellings, twisted and foreign would be here, as though a people that saw the world very differently than we did existed, and one day vanished as if they had never been.”

“Okay,” he said, backing away slowly. “Thanks, some great ideas there, gonna just go make some notes you go back to the whatever you are doing. Nice talking to you. See you around.” *Whew, he could have taken a minute to think about it.*

Finally Elita, who started out by saying “I would have waterfalls pouring in from high in the sky, obscured by clouds making it look like there was always higher you could go. Farms and fields would stretch as far as the eyes could see, but off in the distance a shining city, green- no emerald! And you could go there, find a single winding path that led through the mountains to the shining city. But try as you might you could never find your way back. But if you went forward, moved through the city and out the other side, somehow in the distance there would be the farms again, calling you back to your real home from the world of dreams.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

From these he pieced together a pretty fantastic place, starting with the slab that Everest described. At one edge he put a great waterfall, where the lakes and rivers of the world ended up and cascaded over the edge endlessly. At another edge he put foreboding mountains full of caves and tunnels, leading down into the slab. At another edge he put dying plant life, and a crumbling village with dilapidated houses and gravestones everywhere. The forth edge, to replenish the water lost across the slab he set a waterfall, high in the clouds. It cascaded down a rainbow and sent shimmering light dancing upon any near enough to feel the spray of the water washing over them. In the center he set the light, above a fountain much like the one in Farborough he last saw Amy disappear from. Out from this point he imagined roads, leading to all four corners past villages, farms, and his own personal castle. The grounds of the castle had libraries, practice yards, bedrooms fit for a king. With everything in place he called his friends, and announced he was going to try creating this place so he had an area to send those that hit the shield he wanted to make.

“That seems like pretty advanced magic,” Elita cautioned him. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’ll put as much of my spiritual energy into it as I can, it should be fine.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

For nearly ten minutes Lysanias wove magical energies together in the air before him, finally releasing them when he felt the magic had what it needed from him. A shimmering crack in the world opened before him, and he stepped into his own world. It was just as he imagined it, and the others cautiously followed, looking around.

“You really did it,” Don remarked, peering at the castle in the distance. “Magic. Who knew?”

“There’s a cave at the very bottom of those mountains,” Lysanias explained, pointing. “I’m going to use the glass to see it and teleport over there. Then I can make

the shield open up inside it, making it look like just a black surface. They can then stumble out and head here, where I'll let them out once they calm down."

"Will teleportation work in here?" Everest asked.

"I don't see why not. I'm just going from one place inside here to another place inside here. With the sword to draw from I'll even get a boost of energy, and it isn't that far."

"I guess, worst that could happen is you end up going nowhere."

*Or dead, everyone was thinking.*

But he tried it and it worked fine, he explored the cave so he could know where to put the door into this place, then went back. With that they left the pocket world and Lysanias said he would start on the next part of his plan.

"If you can cast that spell that will augment my skill, maybe I can have what I want to make done and if you all want something made I can work on it next."

"You'll have to go buy the shield from someplace though," Don reminded him. "You can't use your powers to make one and make it into a talisman, right?"

"Ah, but you do not understand," he replied with a smile. "All I need is a single coin, and I have a pouch full of those. I make the shield out of the special metal, which one I'm not sure yet, I've got like three to choose from? The trick is I make the coin into the talisman. Then I simply drop it into the center of the shield and flow the metal atop it. My alchemical abilities never touch the coin, but it continues to project the "hole" atop the shield."

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"I was thinking I- and by that I mean you, could design a shield that included a cover. The cover could be put over it and touch the edge of the shield, but not the hole. That way nothing would fall in by accident."

"Or if you were fighting someone you didn't to make disappear," Everest concluded.

"I probably could design something like that," Don admitted. "I'll think about it."

"Then I'll get to work on the talisman. If you don't mind, Elita?"

She shook her head. "You know it's another three spells you want bouncing around my head? Plus I need something to attack the skeletons with, that healing spell we talked about that can help us and hurt them at the same time."

"You mean those spells you will use *all the time* no doubt," Lysanias countered. "Think about it- you want to be a painter? A sculptor? Play an instrument of some kind? While you do these tasks you can be the greatest whatever the world has ever seen. Forget waiting tables, sell the most elaborate paper animals anyone has ever seen. Learn fabrication or imbuing and make things for people while they wait, instead of a week or two from now. Imagine what you could do with the greatest skill anyone has ever known, even for an hour!"

"I wasn't saying it wouldn't do it. Anyway, you're donating your own energy, world maker. You too, Don and Everest."

So Lysanias got started on his shield project, dumping some coins into the lab "donation" box to buy more materials, and he selected things from their inventory that suggested moving things from one place to another. He almost contemptibly tossed these objects around after powdering them, making the barest of patterns and relying on his newfound skill, twelve times better than any master who ever studied the art, to guide him. He could almost *see* where every bit of material needed to be before he put even the merest grain down, and a few hours after starting the process he put energy into the coin and was rewarded with a hole in the air above it that emptied into darkness. With the task complete the skill faded, and Lysanias stood there wondering how he had done that. The clarity he had was gone, and he knew to attempt such a thing normally would have been madness. He wasn't even sure how he would begin, research on how to do what he had just done would be needed. Perhaps even days or weeks of it. *Where did I pull the knowledge of how to do what I just did? Does magic*

*know everything? Even about this? It all seemed so easy a second ago, and now it's gone. What a strange thing.*

"I guess the technique works," Everest allowed. "No wonder the guild wouldn't want that particular combination of magic to get out into the world."

"But you have to have so many things happen for it to work," protested Elita. "You have to have people you can steal energy from. You have to be able to put energy into your magic. You need someone with the basic skills you want to augment. It's just saving time, that's all. He didn't do anything he couldn't have done normally. It just would have taken a much longer time."

"I suppose you're right."

"Rest up," Lysanias told them. "Tomorrow I'll want to augment my skill at alchemy and make the shield."

The next day they did just that, Lysanias creating two large blobs of the metal from stone with a casting directed at that skill, and then flowing them as directed by Don with another. Together they created a large, round shield complete with cover, and tipped the coin into it. Carefully. Tipping the shield they got it into the center and Lysanias made it swallow the coin up, then they applied the cover and made sure it fit. It had one latch at the top, and curved hooks at the bottom to secure it there. It was designed as something that could just be thrown off at a moment's notice, and was made of the heavier, tougher metal Lysanias could create. The shield "backing" was created of the lighter material his sword used to be made of, and from under the cover at the front edge the rim had been tapered to be razor sharp. While the front was made of the heavy, dense stuff Don said would probably never take a scratch. Thus he could bash with it if the cover was on, slash with it either on or off, and totally negate attacks while off by sucking them into the personal dimension. Both stood admiring it when it was finally done, it was a work of art as much as the greatest shield Don said he had ever conceived of. With his skill and some drawings to follow by Don the cover had an image of a mountain scene on it that would have taken an artist weeks to create.

*I wanted a dragon, or something else feared in this world, but Don suggested paying homage to my spirit. I'm glad he did, it does fit me really well.*

"With your now impressive skill at reflowing metal, I figured I might as well design something really special," he had said when they looked the plans over. "Normally one would have to beat it into shape near a hot forge, you just think about it and it happens. So why not?"

"We did some good work today," Don admitted.

"I agree. Know anyone that can teach me to handle a shield?"

"Oh, I know a guy. But you're going to help me create something next."

"I don't know how to fabricate though," he protested.

"I just want your energy, lad. Not fair if only you get to make something now is it?"

He laughed. "I'm at your command. You might want to fabricate Everest's other gauntlet after that. You'll have the skill, might as well get the most use out of it."

"Good idea lad, I'll see what he wants. We're going to be ready for this undead army, aren't we?!"

"I hope so," he replied, knowing there was still so much that couldn't be planned for given what their anonymous foe seemed capable of. "I really hope so."

When Animals Attack

When: Several days later

Where: RED hideout

In the dream, Lysanias was standing in a strange field under a cloudless sky. The field was hard and black, with yellow lines making an almost box painted everywhere. The field went on and on, and in the distance was a figure. He thought it was a person not too far from him, but as the figure got closer and closer he realized the figure had been further away than he had thought.

The figure was a giant.

In the dream, the giant had taken the platform that the rail system had used and shrunk it down to be attached to both feet. Wheels made the giant coast along directly towards Lysanias, who found he could not run or even move an inch. The giant got closer and closer, and despite waving and yelling he could not get the giant's attention.

In the dream, the giant squished Lysanias dead, and rolled on, not even noticing the small bump his broken body had made.

Lysanias woke up.

"So let me get this straight," Elita requested when he rushed to wake everyone. "You dreamed of being run down by a giant on some sort of wheeled boot, and somehow that made you think of a war machine?"

"Actually that wheeled boot idea isn't a bad one," Don mused. "I bet I could whip something like that up. Have to be some kind metal sole that went- what?" He looked up from trying to make an oval shape with his hands to see the others were staring at him.

"I don't think that's the point," Everest told him.

"Sorry," he replied sarcastically, not meaning it. "Give me your notebook, Lysanias, I'll just make some notes quietly then, shall I? And forget giving you guys any share of the profits from Don's Sensational Rolling Boot Attachment."

"The point is," he went on, handing it over, "that yes, I immediately thought of the war machines. What else could be that big and mobile? Amy said we needed to take care of them before something worse happened, and we got sidetracked with the whole wanderer slash shadow kin team up. I think we need to get moving and get the next nearest war machine torn apart before someone has it up and running."

"In the middle of the night?" Elita went on.

"I was just crushed by a giant. I think that's an urgent enough message from wherever dreams come from to get moving as soon as we can."

"Then why not dream about it earlier?"

"I can't control when and what I dream about. Can you?"

"Of course not, I don't have any training controlling my dreams."

"Doubt you could dream the future anyway," Don muttered, trying to quickly sketch his idea in the book.

"Exactly. Wait, whose side are you on?"

"Sorry, what? Couldn't hear you over the sound of cash registers dinging as people line up to buy my boot attachments. I could even make kids sizes, they'd love them! You're going to be sorry when the profits start rolling in."

"Forget about the stupid boot attachments for one second!"

"I wonder if putting the wheels all in a row would work..."

"Is he always like this?" she asked Everest.

"Eh, sometimes. Do you know where we're going?" Everest asked.

"Of course. I wouldn't have gotten you all up otherwise. Sorry your training will have to be cut short, but get your stuff. We're going to Levithmera. If," he added, "there's a portal to a RED branch there."

“Sure is,” said the wizard on duty when asked. He was fairly young, probably an apprentice given the lateness of the hour. “I can put you down in the RED Dragon Inn. You leaving now?”

Lysanias looked back to the group.

“We picked up all our stuff,” Everest told him. “We’re ready.”

Lysanias hefted his shield, checked his sword, mentally reviewed the last few days, and nodded. *I took Tyrfake back to Merlot, provided my energy to help Don make both he and Everest a spellcasting focus for Neptune spells, and got some instruction in blocking. I got everything out of my room, and I’ve got a full quiver of stone arrow-lances. That should make us as ready as we’ll ever be.* “I think you’re right, open it up.”

“You got it.” The boy grabbed a pair of gloves from the desk and put them on, then consulted a chart as to which portal he needed to uncover. Finding the right one he walked the group over to it and easily lifted the block, moving it out of the way. Everest whistled.

“I would be hard pressed to move that much rock,” he admitted. “Maybe with Lysanias’ help? He’s gotten fairly good at it, given how much he practices with those arrow-lances of his.”

“It’s the gloves, they make a certain amount of stone weightless,” the boy explained. “Magic, am I right?”

“When you’re right, you’re right. Thanks,” Lysanias told him, striding through the hole in the air.

“Sure thing.”

With everyone through the rock was slid back into place again, and the group headed into the main part of the inn. They looked around, searching for the exit. Lysanias saw there weren’t too many people still up but one table was still rowdy.

“No humans?” he wondered, looking them over. There was a dark elf, a dwarf, an ogre of all things-

“There’s one,” Everest remarked, pointing. The group looked over and he was right. A human dressed in wizard’s robes was passed out under the table. Looking again Lysanias saw a strange rabbit with large teeth on the table and apparently engaged in some kind of drinking contest with the others. They were all shouting “chug, chug, chug!” at him while he gulped down a cup of something that looked taller than he was. The others had similar glasses.

“What’s with the rabbits lately?” Elita asked him.

“You got me,” he answered with a shake of his head. *Still, everyone else here seems to be a beastfolk. Weird.* “Come on.”

“Wait lad, do you know which way we’re going from here? We can take a table and you can ask. Better than finding a place out in the street to do it. Middle of the night or not.”

“Good point.”

The group took a table and Lysanias closed his eyes. *What direction do we go from here to reach the nearest war machine?*

No answer.

*To reach the nearest war machine, what general heading should we take after leaving town?*

*South-east.*

“We need to head south-east. Once out of town we can get the balloon out and start heading in that direction. I’ll see how far we need to go once we’re moving.”

The others had nothing to add so they headed out the door of the inn and into the street. Looking back it seemed the rabbit had just cleaned the others out in some kind of card game, and was raking the money into a sack. He shook his head.

It was fairly quiet out in the street, with only a few beastfolk walking briskly to their destinations, heads down. It was fairly cloudy here, so Lysanias uncovered his sword pommel and Elita pulled out her dagger made of solid light. "Which way to the town gates I wonder?" she asked.

"The fastest way, you mean?" asked Everest. "Just heading in a straight line in any direction would probably get us out of town. That's good enough to get the balloon out."

"Then pick one so I can get back to sleep."

"I could put you to sleep," said a new voice, coming into the circle of light around the group. Lysanias looked up at the figure which seemed to be a lion on two feet, holding a sword. "Permanently."

"He's not lion, we don't appreciate your kind around here," said another voice, as two more figures stepped up behind the lion. One was a bear looking person, shaggy and taller than the lion, but with a strangely metallic arm in place of a natural one. The other was a goat, with curved horns atop its head. The bear carried a mace while the goat gripped a morningstar, twirling it slowly. All three wore little clothing, being covered with fur, but all still looked dangerous.

"Puns? Really?" asked the lion, looking back at the bear.

"What? Are they too much to bear?"

"They really get my goat!" said the goat. The two started giggling, which was a weird noise coming from a bear.

"I've bear-ly begun to pun," the bear managed.

"This goat can make a note!"

"Would you two knock it off!" roared the lion. "We are trying to intimidate these people. You are not helping."

"Eh, what's the point?" asked the goat. "I'm through being baaaaaad."

"Yeah boss, they're just going to stomp all over us. I'm hungry, and suddenly in the mood for bear claws."

"Look, maybe we can come back and start again?" asked the lion.

"Uh, no," answered Elita, magic sparkling around her. "One chance is all you get. Let light strike down my foes!" Magic flashed, and the familiar beam of light leapt towards the lion from her outstretched hand. Instead of flashing between all of them the lion put a hand up as well and the spell seemed to be sucked into him. He closed his fingers dramatically.

"Or will they?" the bear asked, grinning and raising his weapon.

*What was that?*

"Get them!" commanded the lion, and the bear charged forward as the lion swung for Lysanias. The goat loudly called out "Painweaver the cruciatus, let us listen to the tortured cries of our victims!" and transformed into a hideous demon/goat hybrid. It had bony spikes protruding from various parts of its body, even longer horns, and the face was more skeletal and disturbing. Especially with that frozen grin it had now.

*Right, that can't be good. Feel the spiritual energy coming off that guy, how can one body contain all that?*

With a cry, Elita went flying down the street, and the ram/demon started to laugh uproariously. Elita landed with a thud, the wind knocked out of her so she could hardly cry out.

Don and Everest drew their weapons, Don getting his from the contain ward that hung at his belt and Everest drawing his daggers. The three seemed to recoil a little from the light, but Lysanias hardly noticed as the lion was upon him. The only thing he had at hand was the shield, which he barely got up in time to deflect the sword blow. Unnoticed at his hip the sword started jerking towards the lion, but he didn't have time

for that. Behind them, Elita started casting a spell while the bear clashed with Don, who deflected the blow with a flick of his halberd.

*Spirit of the mountain, I think we could use- Wha?* He tried to hold back his shield which went slicing through the air of its own accord, nearly hitting Everest who jumped back from it. "I think that guy can move things without touching them," he apologized.

"No, you think? Isn't there something you should be doing now? Or is it out?"

"I got interrupted!"

"Let these wounds be healed!" cried Elita, finishing her healing spell. She wasn't completely healed from it, but she wasn't an inch from dying at the moment either.

Everest sprang to help Don, struggling with the bear who looked like he was trying to drive Don to the ground with his metallic arm. He struck out with the iron dagger, making the bear dodge to the side. He caught the bear's left arm as he whirled, trying to keep both of them in sight.

The lion took a step back and magical energy started swirling around him, looking exactly like the sparkling light Elita's magic produced. It was just as bright and Lysanias groaned. *Don't tell me.*

With no one to swing Lysanias' shield at the ram hybrid simply pointed at him, and Lysanias quickly got the shield into position, expecting an attack. He didn't expect what was essentially a lightning bolt hitting the shield and zapping him. His arm felt like it was on fire as the bolt was conducted through the shield and into him, and he had to let the arm drop, unable to keep the shield up.

Don finally got to take a swing at his opponent, drawing blood from the leg. "We're just passing through," he shouted. "There's no need for this. We're leaving anyway."

Several things now happened simultaneously. Everest, being on the ball and seeing the bright magical effects that should be coming from Elita coming instead from the lion cast "Suppression!" It wasn't enough, and a bolt of light went through the party. Elita jolted and went unconscious, and was moments from dying. Lysanias took damage to the leg with Don got hit in the right arm and Everest took a hit to the chest.

"Now that's a spell!" roared the lion.

*Spirit of the mountain, please hear me, Elita may be dying!*

There was no answer.

*Why do I even try?*

The ram/demon hybrid pointed at Elita, who it seemed was now wreathed in fire and burning, but a quick glance showed this to be some kind of trick, she was actually fine, still lying there in a heap on the ground.

The bear continued to press the attack on Don, who again knocked the blade out of the way rather than try and contend with the bear's strength and meet it head on. Everest took a step closer, taking advantage of the bear's distraction to try stabbing it again. He once again scored on the leg, making the bear growl at him.

*One more time, then I have to try something else. Spirit of the mountain, hear my voice and come to me!*

*I hear you.*

*It's about time.*

The mountain spirit stood there before the ram, who startled back a bit and simply swung his mace. The spirit didn't bother dodging and it bounced off.

"Finally!" Don scolded him. "You really need to work on that."

"It... doesn't have ears?" Lysanias tried to rationalize it. *Really though, how can it not hear me all the time? If it's my soul, and it seems to be as wounds to either of us transfer to the other, there must be something else to it. It almost seems random if it comes out or not, she really is dying so it's not the danger we're in.*

"It's part of your soul."

"You don't say? I don't know how it works."

The lion now raised his sword and charged at Lysanias, who still couldn't move his left arm. But he could move stone, and one of his arrow-lances shot out of the quiver to intercept the blade, knocking it away from him.

"Oh ho, so you aren't helpless. This fight is still undecided!"

"It doesn't have to be a fight at all," he reiterated, trying to get through to this guy.

"That's what you think."

Don now took a swing at the bear, targeting the leg that had already been injured. The halberd cut deep, making the bear cry out and topple to the ground.

"Do you want your friend to die?" Don asked him, tearing the halberd out. "He can be saved if you put your sword away."

"Never!" cried the lion.

Everest let go of his knives, letting the float so he didn't have to get close to his next opponent. The mountain spirit struck out at the hybrid, taking no chances. It knew what Lysanias knew, that if given a chance to attack again the demonic creature could throw them around from anywhere. He tried to dodge but got hit, then shook it off like "is that all you've got?"

The lion tried to get his blade around the floating arrow-lance but couldn't manage it, Lysanias held the blade back. Don now joined him, striking out at the lion from behind. He got the lion right in the head, sprawling him forward with a huge gash, and he hit the ground. "And now for you," he snarled, whirling on the ram.

"I'm not worried," the ram said, taking two more blows from the mountain. "If this is the worst you can do." He glanced at Lysanias, who went flying and landed badly on his already wounded leg. He blacked out from the pain, unsure if he had even cried out or not before the blackness took him.

When he came to, the concerned face of Don was staring down at him. His arm was still torn up, but he looked relieved to see Lysanias' eyes opening.

"You all right Lysanias?" he asked, relief clear in his voice.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"Still out in the street, it's only been a few minutes."

"Elita!" He tried to rise, but Don pushed him back down.

"She's being treated as well."

"How do you feel?" asked another voice from his right, and he looked over to see a squirrel beastfolk in priest's robes standing over him.

"I think I'm okay," he managed after a moment.

"Excellent. You may take him away."

"What?"

An angry looking cat of some sort came forward and roughly grabbed him up. "You're under arrest." He felt shackles being put on his hands, which were being roughly held behind his back.

"You have got to be kidding me," Lysanias groaned.

"Ah. Afraid so lad. But don't worry, we'll have it all sorted out soon."

"What happened?" He looked around at the scene where several other healers were tending to the wounded. There was the lion and the bear, *but where did the cat come from? And is that the ogre that we saw from the bar? What's he doing out here?*

"They were shadow kin," Everest told him, being brought over by a wolf. His hands were shackled as well, and his wounds hadn't been treated. "The cat let it slip when it showed up. It said 'I'm back, what did I miss?' From there we put two and two together. I managed to get my blade into the ram and the cat, that knocked the shadow kin out of them."

"Come to think about it, I guess I did feel the sword tug a bit when that lion guy attacked me. Just didn't register at the time."

“Had to borrow that,” Don added, “hope you don’t mind. As we couldn’t banish them like you can, we had to cut them up. Took a little longer but it worked. That’s when the ogre showed up.”

“They just left the bodies. In the dark we couldn’t tell.”

“That is what happened, they just went to possess someone else after the body went unconscious. By the time we got the thing out of the orc the authorities had arrived, and here we are.”

“Once again being thrown into prison for trying to protect ourselves from things that want to kill us.”

“Yeah. Are you sure you’re okay? Your leg was at a funny angle for a while there. The priest healed you okay?”

“I think so. I’m going to owe the church money now, aren’t I?”

“Only if you don’t want the guild after you,” put in a nearby healer.

“Wonderful. Elita is alive, right? She took that fall and then her own spell. What even was that? How did he do that?”

“Somehow absorbed the spell?” Everest answered. “I’m not sure. It’s a rare ability or some sort of magical object I guess. Maybe you can ask him at the trial.”

“Trial? Another one? We don’t have time for this!”

Don chuckled. “Not to worry, lad. With the bizarre behavior of the cat and ogre, simply running off as they did to join the fight, the matter is being looked into. The king should hear our story tomorrow and hopefully let us go.”

*Another day wasted. My dream was fairly insistent, what is this going to mean? And where did my shield go? I hope nobody takes the cover off and starts poking it.*

He couldn’t stop giggling for several minutes after that.

## Another Day, Another Escape From Prison

When: The next day

Where: Prison cell

“So,” Everest said wearily before biting into an apple. “Here we are again.”

The group was in three different cells, Elita having been placed with another woman. Don had been put with another human, while Everest and Lysanias were together in the dusty, ill lit jail cell between the two. All of them could freely talk as they were nearby each other, while the guard’s desk was at the end of the hall. Unlike the last jail cell he had been in, which had been more open, this one was more like stone rooms with an iron gate for a door instead of wood. So while they couldn’t see each other, they could still hear each other. Other cells, empty ones, were across the hall from them.

“Yup.” Lysanias chose some oddly long, yellow fruit and tried to figure out how to get at the insides. *Never actually braved one of these before, no time like the present.*

The two had spent a quiet night, falling asleep rather quickly after being brought down into the cell area. After being awoken that morning they had been given a bowl of some unidentified mush and a piece of bread, which Lysanias just shook his head at and created his own food with magic. He offered for the others but they all knew the spell and got their own. He hadn’t dreamed anything new during the night, and was disgusted to see the ceiling of the cell when he opened his eyes that morning.

“Of course, it’s still once more for you than us. Yup, have to be in jail *three* times before you’re considered a lifetime criminal. How many times is this for you now? It’s three, right? Once more than us, and it’s two for us, so...”

“Ha-ha.”

“I don’t know, lad,” Don’s voice came floating down the hall. “Three times in jail since you’ve been awake? This isn’t some kind of fetish for you, is it? Spending a night in a cell? Getting locked up? What I mean is, you’re not doing this on purpose, are you?”

“I have no idea what you’re saying. But I get why Xerxes ran away so fast when he learned there was trouble. You try to do the right thing, and look where it gets you.”

“You’re not giving up on this, are you?” Everest asked him.

He shook his head. “I have to see this through. That dream of the undead swarming over the land was too specific to ignore. And we found our light, didn’t we? It’s coming, and only we know about it. Seems logical it falls to us to take care of it.”

“Not feeling all that much like a light of hope right now,” Elita informed them. “And can I ask why we’re still here? I thought we were in a hurry.”

“We can’t just break out!” Lysanias protested.

“We could,” she countered. “Even I could, with just the-”

“You better not!” cautioned the guard, coming over to bang his stick on the door. He was a raccoon beastfolk, complete with dark mask around his eyes. “Hey, where did you get that food?” He leaned left and right, looking in the adjacent cells. “You’ve all got some. And better than I had this morning. What gives?”

“We made it with magic,” Lysanias explained. “We can all do it.”

“Wait, you’re all magic users?” The guard took a step back nervously. “You better not be thinking about breaking out.”

Lysanias stood and went over to the door, gripping the bars he could easily turn into something easier to get through if he wanted to. “Believe me, if I was going to break out of here I would have done it already. The number of ways I could do so would stagger your mind, so just be at ease.” *What would this guy do if these bars suddenly turned into gold? Probably think it was a trick of some kind, but I’m half tempted to do it, just to see what he would do.*

“Ha! If you could you would have by now. The guild would see to you if you broke out with magic.”

“So I wouldn’t use magic. Problem solved.”

“Yeah, okay. You just do that. Now quiet down!” He walked back to his station.

*Make me.* “To answer your question, Elita, we’re still here because breaking out is a bad idea. As Don once said, it results in wanted posters going up everywhere. Or was that you who said that? Somebody did.”

“You’re right, that would be a problem,” she agreed. “They never get my nose quite right on those things.”

Her cell mate snorted and they shared a laugh.

“She has a point though,” Everest agreed. “That war machine starts rolling and we would have a very hard time stopping it.”

He shrugged. “Then they should have asked *why* that fight happened instead of just throwing us in here.”

“The thing is, most of the time something like that would just be a drunken brawl. Or beastfolk going a bit too far. This is their land, we’re not exactly welcome here.”

“You’re taking their side? Besides, it was shadow kin controlling them. But did they ask? No, just in you go. Honestly I’m getting a little tired of it.”

“No reason they would have asked,” Don put in. “They just assumed we were the aggressors because we aren’t beastfolk. Circumstances like ours just wouldn’t even be on their mind. Speaking of that, we have our preparation done, right? Once we take care of this war machine and the final one that exists now, we can see about getting up to a skybourne city. Maybe meet the person behind all this. Once that’s taken care of, we’ll be in the clear.”

“Unless you guys want more magical training, I would need more time to improve my skills. Otherwise, I think we’re ready. If they haven’t lost my shield, that is, we made what we wanted. Also, you think it’ll be that easy? We just show up and the person behind this will be there waiting for us? I mean, we won’t be immediately attacked going up there, of course,” he replied sarcastically. “We’ll just sit down to tea and talk out our feelings.”

“We won’t be attacked, not if we’re wearing those ‘ignore me’ wards of yours.”

Lysanias slapped his face. “We could have been wearing them when we came here! This whole thing wouldn’t have happened. I’m so stupid!”

“Just inexperienced,” Everest assured him. “Or you would have put some armor wards on yourself in that last fight instead of just standing around.”

*Oh great, I did forget that as well, didn’t I? Stupid, stupid, stupid!* “I was trying to get my mountain spirit to hear me and come out, thank you for noticing. Perhaps to the untrained eye it looked like I was just standing there? I assure you I was not.”

“To me it looked like you were getting beat up,” Elita offered. “What with you being flung around and all that. And having your leg broken and passing out.”

*Ugh, she’s right, there must be some way to counter that sort of thing. We’ll need it for the ghost after all. Oh, maybe take them out first? Maybe get your spirit out on the first try instead of the third? Great idea, thanks for the suggestion.* “Another thing I didn’t need reminding of.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Will you quiet down over there?”

“Quite honestly, no, I don’t think we will,” Lysanias shouted over to him. “You want me to be quiet? Come over here and make me!”

Everest stared at him. “You feeling all right? You’re not usually like this.”

“Just frustrated. I’m the one with a dozen abilities but do they actually do me any good? No. I’m always moments from death when something attacks us. Add to that I have no idea where I might settle down when this is over. That war machine could be minutes from smashing this place up. But where am I? Sitting here, doing nothing.”

“Why not the alchemist’s place? They seem like good people.”

He blinked. “What? Oh, to settle down in. Sure, the basement of the mage’s guild, that’s where I want to spend hundreds of years. I don’t want to hide out, making things the guild pretends is magic. I want to make a difference in the world, prove to Him that destroying us was a bad idea. That we could have been so much more given the chance. Maybe find and teach people with abilities, especially alchemists so they can stick together. I have the skills to do it, thanks to Amy. I just need the opportunity. But lately I’m just reminded how weak I am, because you guys are always saving me. I’ll never be able to do any of that if I can’t handle myself.” *You say you’ll stick with me, and I believe you, but I still feel bad about dragging you all over the place like this. I need to show I can take care of myself so you don’t feel bad about going back to your lives when this is over.*

“You’ll come into your own,” Don told him. “One day you’ll be saving us, mark my words.”

“It’s just the situation,” Everest agreed. “You got woken up right as all this started happening. Given a few months earlier, it would have been a different story. And when this is over, you can hide out in a cave for a year and practice to your heart’s content.”

“Practice making gold, especially,” Don put in with a laugh.

“I suppose. Wait a second, ‘ignore me’ wards? Don, what the heck are you doing in jail with us? Couldn’t you have just relaxed your focus and have them walk right by you?”

“And miss all this comradery? Are you kidding?”

“You forgot, didn’t you?” *Was I not the only one? Please say he forgot. Give me this one thing, come on!* He clasped his hands, hoping.

“No I didn’t,” he assured them hastily. *Oh come on! You’re lying, you must be.* “I thought none of them would see me but then this one comes over and cuffs me! The others said there was nothing there but of course they know about magic and stuff and just figured he happened to notice me so the spell had been broken or something. So it didn’t work out that time.”

*A likely story.* “And now you’re stuck here with the rest of us. I’d laugh, but I’m in the same- Wait, what is that noise?”

The others all quieted, listening. Outside the building they were in people were screaming and carrying on, rushing this way and that.

“Say,” Everest said slowly. “You don’t suppose...”

“Hey, guard!” shouted Don. “You haven’t heard anything about a huge metal tower rolling around out there, have you?”

“Why do you think I’ve been trying to quiet you guys down? I’m trying to listen to what’s going on out there. It sounds like some kind of riot.”

Everest and Lysanias shared a look. “Maybe we should get out of here,” Everest suggested.

“Just a second.” *Mountain spirit, can you hear me?*

*I hear you.*

*Why is it when there’s no rush you’re usually... Never mind.* The spirit appeared, but outside the cell, as Lysanias could see ground level through the narrow slit and bars that let a narrow beam of light in. He closed his eyes and the spirit looked around. *Never really needed to use my spirit as my eyes before, given we’re usually right next to each other. But it works in this case.* Not able to see anything out of the ordinary the spirit started growing, careful not to step on anything. Lysanias froze. “Oh great. There’s something coming all right. It’s got to be the war machine. Coming from the ocean, maybe?”

“Another of those things is up and running?” Don asked, almost panicked. “It was all your spirit could do to slow the first one down. How can we take another one that’s probably not a prototype? And already this close to the town, and probably not a pacifist like the other?”

"I've been thinking about that. Leave it to me. For now we need to get out of here." *Mountain spirit, I'm letting you go, but come right back into the cell, okay? I'll need you help us escape.*

The spirit didn't show any signs of acknowledging this but Lysanias knew it would follow orders, and shortly appeared back in the cell. "Come on, we're the only ones that have a chance of stopping that thing." He stepped up to the door and looked the lock over, figuring it wouldn't be that difficult to simply mangle it enough to release him. With a shrug he touched it and willed it to deform and was pleased to see it twist out of the way as he wished. He pushed the door open and let his spirit out, following it and followed by Everest. The guard at the end of the hall was up and looking at them nervously. He gripped his truncheon tightly, probably wondering how to deal with a magic user that had an unknown number of spells.

"Hey, you get back in there this minute!" he tried.

"You're not my mom. Now are you going to give me the keys to these cells or am I just going to get them open myself?" *Because I would rather save my strength for the battle to come.*

"You've got bigger problems than us, anyway," Everest told him. "You're going to need to be out there, trying to keep order and evacuate the city."

"What are you talking about, evacuate? Just what is going on out there?"

"A huge rolling fortress from before the arrival of the chaos moon will soon be smashing its way into, and through, this town. If we don't stop it here, it'll roll over every town everywhere."

"You're kidding! How could you even know that?"

"Someone mention me, Don Fortress?" Don stepped out of his cell as the mountain spirit unlocked it.

"Hey, how did you get out? You didn't do anything, I watched you!"

*Good thing this one isn't the guard that can see unseen things. My spirit just lifted his keys and he didn't even notice.* "Look, don't worry about us. Just get up there and start organizing an orderly retreat from the city. The machine is coming from the coast so focus on any docks you have first."

"I don't take orders from you!"

"I'll go look for our stuff," Don said, moving past the man. "It must be around here someplace."

Meanwhile, the spirit went to unlock the other cell while the human that had been with Don peaked his head out.

"You stay in there!"

"Uh, no?" The man made a break for it down the hall, giving the raccoon a difficult choice to make. Stay there and try to get the man back in the cell, but then potentially let the others go while he did, or just let them all go and see what was going on up above. He could hear a lot of commotion going on up there, so something was happening. The man was coming towards him, so he apparently made his choice and tried to tackle the guy.

The woman with Elita came out of the cell and started chanting "Fight, fight!" over and over as she watched the two men grappling each other. Lysanias hadn't gotten a good look at her, it seemed she was a cat type, looking far more human but with cat ears and tail. *Huh, sort of like the "funny little fox girl" that started all this? Is this what she would have looked like, just with fox features instead of cat? Wonder if she lives around here, it seems most 'beastlike' people do.*

"If a fight between girls is a cat fight, is a fight between guys a dog fight?" Elita asked, looking over at the two.

"Cock fight," the cat said, making both giggle. "Rip his pants off!" she encouraged. "Go for his wooden rod!"

Lysanias shook his head. *I guess he is carrying a club but I wouldn't have referred to it in quite that way.* "Come on, let's go."

"Thanks for getting me out," said the cat, her giggling dying down. "Is it true? Is the city under attack?"

"It's true," Everest told her. "You might want to get underground or head away from the city until it's taken care of."

"Good idea. This cat doesn't have nine lives. See you." She lightly scampered away, hopping the two men still struggling to gain the upper hand. "Now kiss!" she called behind her, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Come on." Lysanias walked over to the two and had the mountain spirit separate them. Neither knew what was going on, but the raccoon could tell something was pinning him to the wall. The man booked it up the stairs the moment he was free of the guard.

"Let me go!"

"When we're past you." *I can't be too far away from my spirit, after all.* "Like I said, you have more pressing problems. Forget us."

"I'll put your keys on the desk," Everest told him, holding them up. He had taken them from the spirit as it went past.

"How did you get those? Give them back!" He struggled to get away from the spirit.

"Like I said, I'll leave them. Oh, and this jail? Two out of five stars, would not stay again. See you."

All three walked off, leaving the struggling raccoon to think about his choice of career or whatever it was raccoons thought about in these situations. The group was largely ignored as all the guards on the upper levels were rushing about, trying to get ready for the arrival of the war machine someone probably reported to them. When Lysanias felt he couldn't go further because his spirit was at the distance limit he had the spirit let the raccoon go and join them, looking for Don and their stuff.

*Rather ironic that once again the shadow kin land us in jail by possessing people and making them attack us, then we get free because a war machine shows up. Probably 'someone's' idea of a little joke. Am I right?* He flicked his eyes skyward but expected no answer.

"Get another set of keys," Everest told Lysanias as the spirit came up to them. "We'll start checking locked doors. That's where they'll put equipment, under lock and key."

He saw no reason to argue and lifted another set, then they wandered the halls of the place looking for their stuff. Finally they came across a room with multiple shelves overflowing with confiscated items.

*Don, we're on the third floor, come get us,* Lysanias pushed his thoughts out. *Hopefully he hears that, but he's got to be somewhere in the building and it isn't that big.*

A moment later the dwarf joined them, looking their packs over. "We can't carry all this stuff into battle with us," he grumped. "Hate to leave it here though. This isn't an inn, and I'd rather not have to come back."

"Here, shove the packs through the shield, we can go get them later," Lysanias said, uncovering it.

"Ah, good plan, lad."

With everything but their weapons and necessities like the ward dispenser put away, the group was ready for action. They each got two armor wards and made their way out of the prison, unlocking certain doors with the stolen keys. Once outside the spirit grew again, big enough to carry them in hand and they took off towards the coast, where the imposing form of the war machine was already busy smashing stuff to pieces.

"I hope you have a really good plan," Elita breathed, astonished at the power being displayed as the tentacle like arms whipped around and smashed through buildings. People were streaming away from the site, making it difficult for the spirit to get through without stepping on anyone, but it was carefully getting into range.

"I hope so too," Lysanias admitted. *I have to get inside, it's the only way. But can I teleport into it? I've seen the inside of one enough to know the general layout, but are they all the same? I haven't seen the inside of this one, does that make a difference? Once inside, will my plan even work? Or am I just going to blow myself and the entire town up by being stupid as always?*

"Oh no, look!" Don was pointing down, breaking Lysanias' train of thought. The group looked over the edge of the spirit's hands and saw what he was pointing at. "We've got more problems."

Six wanderers, dressed in armor and carrying swords were accompanying the war machine.

## Ghost Busted

When: A moment later

Where: In the hand of the mountain spirit

"I've got even worse news," Everest informed them, pointing to the side of the war machine. "That can only mean one thing."

The group looked and saw several beastfolk and beastkin standing there, rather than panicking and running away from the giant machine that was currently smashing a building down.

"More shadow kin," groaned Lysanias.

"That, or just really brave people willing to lend us a hand in our time of need."

"I, on the other hand, have good news," Elita announced, looking up. "I think we might be getting some help."

"Help?"

There was an enormous crash as a dragon swooped out of the sky and landed on the back of the war machine. "How dare you attack my town!?" it bellowed, then took in a deep breath and started breathing cold air, of all things, on the metal monstrosity. Lysanias could feel the temperature around the area dropping, and got a quick look at the dragon as they were set down by the mountain spirit.

"Feathery wings? Pale blue color? That's a sky dragon," Everest told them, not missing an opportunity to show off his knowledge.

"Catalog it later, we have wanderers to take care of," Don chided him, hopping off the hand.

With everyone clear the spirit charged at the war machine, growing again as it did. The tentacles had wrapped around the dragon, and the machine was trying to pry him off, but the dragon's claws were biting in deep. The spirit went for one, trying to rip it out of the body.

"Well met, whatever you are!" boomed the dragon. "I was afraid I would have to take this strange thing alone. Not that I couldn't have, of course." It used its breath attack again, now focused on the other tentacle.

Lysanias and the others now ignored the fight between titans, focusing on the wanderers who came rushing towards them. *Great, four on six.*

Everyone but Lysanias started casting magic, with Everest finishing first. "Augment Skill: Blocking!" he cast on Lysanias.

Both Elita and Don waited until the warders were fairly close, holding their magic ready and causing the air around the group to shimmer. "Elemental Ring: Knockout!" Don cast, creating a swirling wall of energy to slam into the wanderers and knock them back. They were all flung to the ground, carried by the force of the spell which pushed them several meters away.

Don held up a hand to Elita, shaking his head. "Your spell is lethal, lass. Let's see how much fight they have left in them."

Two didn't get up, the others struggled to their feet. It was difficult to see them, Don had kept the swirling wall of magic around the group. They didn't look really eager to try breaching it and attack.

"That's some spell," Everest allowed, as the group walked over there to see what they had to say for themselves. "No wonder the mage's guild doesn't want combat magic getting out. Imagine if it was fire or ice instead of just knockout."

"Suddenly I am feeling better about confronting whoever is going to make undead cover the earth," agreed Elita.

The group stopped before the shimmering wall of energy separating the two. "As you can see," Lysanias called, "we've been getting some help. Do you really want to continue attacking us? Look at what you're now traveling with-"

He didn't get to continue as the long tube atop the war machine suddenly pivoted. The spirit and dragon hadn't made much headway stopping the thing, but it had more weapons than just the tentacle arms to use. A brilliant light shot out of the tube and lit the area, striking a building in the distance and instantly setting it on fire. Smaller tubes also lit up, causing smaller but no less damaging fires to nearby areas. While the laser light was completely silent, the exploding flames that resulted and the screams of those inside were not.

"Is this really what you want? Is your revenge worth so much?"

One wanderer staggered to the front and dropped his sword. *"I never wanted this,"* they said. *"Lysanias, you have my word. My association with the emperor is at an end."* They struggled out of the armor, turning to the others. *"You must see we are being used! Look, isn't this what happened to our world? Death and destruction at the hands of the shadow kin? How can we allow this to go on? We have done more harm than good in our quest for vengeance. My people, set it aside, I beg you!"*

"Esta?"

*"It is I."*

The others looked confused, as if swayed by Esta's words but still not able to fight off whatever influence was causing them to go to such lengths. Suddenly the area lit up again as the main laser fired, taking out another large area of the city. They lowered their swords.

*"But what can we do?"* asked one. *"It won't let us inside again now."*

"You've been inside?" Lysanias asked excitedly. "Don, drop this barrier, there's a chance but we have to hurry. Before it fires again."

Don let the spell go, but Elita's magic still shimmered around her. She was taking no chances, and her attack spell was held to be released should they make any hostile move.

*"If you get inside you can stop it?"*

"Maybe. It's a risk. But in theory what I have in mind should work."

*"Then we shall take that risk together. But it must be held steady if we are to go inside. Even taking you as a ghost, becoming solid again carries the risk that when we solidify the machine will jerk, and bury us in a wall. The hallways are so cramped, even a slight misstep will mean our deaths."*

"Let me see what I can do about that." *Dragon, mighty dragon, brave dragon of ice and sky- Hear me! I can stop this attack from within. But I have to have a moment of stillness to get inside. My spirit will help you, get on opposite sides and hold it down if only for a second.*

"I hear you, whoever that is," the dragon shouted. "I will do as you ask, but you must go on about my bravery and skill later." He laughed and jumped down, bracing himself against a building as the spirit took the other side. Lysanias grabbed onto Esta, sending his spirit all the energy he could as it gripped the sides of the machine.

*"We'll keep the shadow kin busy out here,"* one of the wanderers said, turning to meet the rush of the beastfolk that were coming towards them.

"Hurry back," Don grumped. "We've only got two light knives and you're the only one who can take care of them permanently. I won't ask you to give up your sword."

He looked over at Esta. *I really hope this conversion to our side again is genuine. I would hate to think I am about to cut myself off from my friends and now need to defend myself. But they did drop their sword and armor, I'll just have to trust they're not about to teleport me to the other side of the continent or anything like that.* "That's probably for the best."

The two holding the war machine strained, holding it in place, and Esta shifted them both inside.

"Where to now?" they asked, voice coming out of the darkness. The inside shook, slamming them against the nearby wall which they put their hands against to try and steady themselves.

"I don't know, I can't see anything." He uncapped his sword light, playing it about the inside. They were as he remembered from his time tearing the similar war machine apart; the passageways were fairly tight, not really designed for people and especially not while in a combat situation. One thing he didn't remember was them being half full of water, lending credence to his theory it had been in the ocean for some time, and had come from there. The water was freezing, probably a side effect of the dragon breathing on this thing's metal skin, but at least it was still water at the moment. And he could see now, so he looked around. "Ah, that's better. Towards the center, we need to find the power source for this thing. It's a long barrel looking thing with all kinds of other pipes stuck into it."

*"I know the thing you speak of, quickly, this way."*

*I am inside, you have my thanks, oh dragon. We are on our way to the center of this behemoth, you only need distract it a moment longer.*

The two made their way upwards, climbing a rung ladder, crawling through narrow passageways, and trying to keep their footing as the machine lurched and battled the two outside. *Luckily it can't even see my spirit, or hurt it by accident. So it can at least stand in front of that main tube and keep it from starting any more fires.*

Only a moment later they stood before the main power source for the war machine, and Lysanias took a deep breath. "We may not have much time, after I do this. It may just explode, killing us all. I understand if you want to go insubstantial again."

*"Can you contact your friends outside? Have a member of my race keep them safe in this way. If you tell me when, perhaps I can be quick enough to save us from such a fate as well."* He took Lysanias' hand. *"You will not face the risk my actions created alone."*

*"Good idea. No need for them to be endangered by this." Quick, Don, get the wanderers to go insubstantial with one of you. I'm about to cut this thing's power but it could blow up in my face. I'll give you to a count of twenty.*

"On twenty one," he told Esta, and started counting. On twenty he put a hand on the power source and let his power flow out. He flinched and hoped he wasn't going to be dead in a second. *Or cause the deaths of a significant portion of the town. But this will work, it has to.*

Cracking his eyes open he saw that he wasn't, and as the lurching of the machine had stopped, it seemed his idea of going for the heart of this death tower had paid off.

*"It has become quiet. How did you do that?"*

"Turned it against itself. I can change the fundamental nature of something, to be the opposite of what it normally is. This usually feeds power to the machine. Now it does the opposite, *not* feeding power to the machine."

*"Astonishing."*

"Be impressed later. It could still explode, we have to take care of it." He let go of Esta's hand and bent to the floor. "I need to separate it from the floor. Find all the points it connects into the main structure, will you?"

*"If that is the next step. I hear a whining, coming from this barrel like thing. Should I be worried?"*

"If it gets too loud, we better go insubstantial again. But we should be safe for the moment." *I hope.* Lysanias went about "un-welding" the power supply from the floor, basically just separating the platform and stabilizing rods that braced the outer casing of whatever was inside generating power. All the time the high pitched whine continued, getting louder and more insistent. It took most of his energy but finally when all the connections were severed he simply dropped a contain ward on the thing and watched as it was sucked in, disappearing into whatever space wards created.

*“Does that do it? Are we safe?”*

“We should be.” He set the ward down and watched it a moment, figuring that it would burn up in a second. It did. “Whew, that’s over,” he breathed, feeling relief flooding into him.

*“Now what happened? Where did it go?”*

“It exploded. Because it was no longer inside the ward, the ward burned away as normal because it had nothing to hold anymore.”

*“I don’t really understand but as long as you do. We still seem to be moving.”*

“There may be smaller sources of power? Or the dragon may just be bashing it. Let me see.” He closed his eyes, drawing on the senses of the spirit again. “It is still moving,” he said after a moment, “but quite sluggishly. Can you take me out again? I need to help with those shadow kin the others are fighting.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” a raspy voice interrupted, and Esta went flying forward towards the wall. They tried to put their arms out which did cushion their body at the expense of their arms. Esta cried out, bouncing away from the wall, one arm now at an unnatural angle while the other hung limply. They fell to their knees, crying out.

“Esta!”

“Now we finish this!”

*Great, my sword and shield are both useless in this situation. And I’m fairly exhausted from getting that power source out of here. There’s only one weapon I have against this thing- I guess arrow-lances it is.*

Lysanias whipped an arrow-lance out of his quiver, striking for the heart of the ghost, who raised a hand. His arrow-lance stopped in mid-air and he realized his control over it had been broken. The ghost smiled. “I’ll turn your own weapons against you.”

He now struggled to take control of it back but the unsharpened end sped towards him instead, forcing him to dodge out of the way. The blunted end cracked into his left arm, nearly breaking it, and Lysanias cried out in frustration. *Why didn’t I BLOCK instead of DODGE?*

*“In the name of the emperor, begone from this world!”* cried Esta, worrying the ghost for a second as it thought Esta out of this fight completely. But the attempt was futile, the ghost stayed right where it was. *“You’ll have to wound it, like a shadow kin,”* Esta explained, *“I can’t banish it as it is.”*

*Can you banish it at all?* Lysanias wondered. The ghost was now turning back to him so he took up the arrow-lance again and hoped the ghost would be at least somewhat distracted. It wasn’t, and again the arrow stopped in mid-air.

“Naught,” the ghost gargled. “Naughty.”

“This isn’t going to work. Let’s try it together!”

*“Agreed.”*

The blunt end of the arrow-lance once again hurled towards Lysanias, who tried to ignore the pain in his left arm and bring the shield up to block it. So the missile sailed low, bashing into Lysanias’ leg instead. *What, am I some kind of damage attractor? Is the Allfather trying to get me killed indirectly? Am I really this useless?*

*“In the name of the emperor, begone from this world!”* both shouted, willing the ghost to be forced out of the world. Once again, the ghost failed to be banished. *Really wish I could have practiced that a bit more. Wait, practiced? I don’t need to practice anything anymore!*

The ghost, feeling it had this fight well in hand, simply stared at Lysanias who felt a building pressure in his chest. Something tore, and the pressure was released. “Crush you, I’ll have my revenge!” cried the ghost. Lysanias clutched his chest, not hurt too badly but not feeling all that great at the moment either. *At least he can’t stop my heart or anything, you have to see something in order to use a supernatural ability on it.*

*“What do we do?”* wailed Esta, unable to think of anything but retreat at this point.

“Let our skill at banishment be augmented!” Lysanias cast, channeling magic through himself like a skybourne. He threw as much as he could into the spell, getting it off as quickly as he could. Magic shimmered around both people, and the ghost looked back and forth between them.

“What are you doing?” it demanded as the magic vanished nearly as quickly as it had appeared. “I’ll get my revenge!” Cold radiated out of him, washing over Lysanias who would have toppled over had the wall not been there to catch him. Esta was also caught in the blast, but was still up.

*“In the name of the emperor, begone from this world!”* once again, both shouted this and willed the ghost to leave them.

“No!” cried the ghost, and all within the war machine was silent.

Both slumped over. Lysanias was now totally exhausted, feeling he didn’t even have enough reserve to teleport himself out of this place without again falling unconscious. *If Esta is faking it, and chooses now to attack...*

*“That seemed to work,”* they said with a wince. *“I don’t mean to alarm you, but I do believe both my arms are broken. Also I think there’s a bit of frostbite in places because I seem to be quite cold.”*

Lysanias put his sword away and stuck a healing ward onto his leg with a sigh. “That’s better. Can you get us out of here?”

*“Barely, if you can heal my arms.”*

“Fine. I’ll give you a couple of healing wards but we need to get back out there. I’m maintaining the spell that makes us better at banishing, hopefully my friends fared better than we did and we can take care of the other shadow kin.”

*“Agreed.”*

Lysanias walked over and slapped wards onto Esta, who relaxed visibly. *“Thank you.”*

“Why didn’t you just become like a ghost instead of hitting the wall? You wouldn’t have been hurt if you had done that.”

*“Yes, I realized that myself. Some seconds after the fact.”* Esta looked away, embarrassed.

*“Ah, I see.”* *Hey, I’m not the only one that screws things up and gets hurt. That’s a relief in some ways.*

*“I’m not very practiced at fighting anymore, since I came here. And fighting shadow kin is quite different.”*

“I can imagine.” *And sympathize.* Lysanias had few spirit battery wards, as making the others seemed to always take priority, but he absorbed a couple just in case. With both at least reasonably healed Esta brought the two outside where they worked together to banish the remaining shadow kin. With their skill augmented by magic and the shadow kin having found only non-magic using bodies, they quickly fell or retreated.

“Are you all right lad?” Don asked, leaning heavily on his halberd. He too was wounded in several places, along with Everest and Elita, who was starting to cast her healing magic for them.

“I’ll survive. Somehow. But-”

“What’s going on here?” demanded a new voice from above. Everyone looked and swooping towards them was a humanoid wolf with leathery wings and dark red horns. He was dressed in fine robes and had a crown on his head, and he skidded to a halt and slammed into a wanderer. “Sorry, sorry about that,” he apologized, trying to untangle himself. “He was right, the landings are rather tricky.”

*“Quite all right,”* replied the wanderer.

“As I was saying, what’s going on here?”

“Hello, your majesty,” said the dragon, arcing his neck to look down at the king. “Everyone, may I present to you King Vyzanth.” Lysanias had no idea how to greet a king, but tried to follow Don’s example and bowed.

“Yes, yes, get on with it,” Vyzanth insisted, waving a hand. “I asked a question. S’kaal, you’re not mixed up in all this, are you?”

“Excuse me for defending your city against this iron tower,” the dragon replied sarcastically. “No, don’t bother to thank me, or this seeming mountain that came out of nowhere to help. It’s fine, I’m not demanding anything for it.”

“You do have my thanks, but right now I need to know if it’s still a danger. What is it? Where did it come from? Who are all you... non-beast people?”

“Yes, how did you disable that thing?” Everest asked.

“Maybe I could tell this story sitting down?” Lysanias asked, eyelids drooping. “That ghost attacked me again, it was all we could do to banish it.”

Meanwhile, the wanderers had clustered around Esta, quietly asking if they should be on their way given the situation. Most had their armor and weapons cast off, but even those that didn’t were surprised to see magical energy sparkling around them, and the enchanted items all vanished. As everyone was trying to work out what just happened a small object appeared out of nowhere, roughly in the middle of everyone standing around the now quiet war machine. Again, magical energies lit the area but this time spreading to encompass everyone.

“It might be an attack!” Lysanias called unnecessarily. Anyone could see this was clearly an attack. “Brace yourselves!” He squeezed his eyes shut, expecting pain.

Lysanias cracked one eye open when he discovered he wasn't blown to pieces, turned into a frog, or otherwise harmed in any way. The magical energies were gone, and everyone else was looking around to try and figure out what the spell had done.

*Hey, I'm not dead! Neat!*

"Everyone all right?" asked Elita, looking concerned.

There were general murmurs of everyone checking themselves over and saying they were fine, and finally the king spoke up again.

"If there are no more interruptions, can I please know what's going on? And by please, I mean I, as king, demand to know what is going on!"

"As these wanderers can tell you," Don said when Lysanias showed no sign of speaking up, "is that a skyebourne has somehow joined forces with shadow kin from the world they hale from. To what end seems clear- they want us destroyed. This skyebourne has probably been possessed, though I have no idea how a shadow kin made it all the way to a floating city. They show up every time the wanderers do, and now we've seen even more evidence a skyebourne is behind this. We thought they were just going to use hordes of undead, but that may have been short sighted on our part. They may be trying to use every means at their disposal to destroy us. For what reason we don't know, it's just what they do apparently."

"Wait, a what?" asked Vyzanth. "What's a skyebourne? Start at the beginning, will you?"

*"Yes, I would like to know that as well,"* put in Esta.

"What?" Don whirled on Esta. "You must have known who you were working for. How did you find us otherwise? You or shadow kin attacked us with great regularity, you must have been keeping tabs on us somehow. You must at least know how that was being done so we can guard against it!"

*"I... don't remember,"* Esta slowly realized. *"Curious. I know I was working with someone but not anything about them. What they looked like, their name, where they were- nothing."*

*"I don't recall either,"* piped up another. Heads were nodded, none of the wanderers, it seemed, could remember anything about who they had met that had promised them their revenge.

*So that spell wasn't an attack. It was simply to erase their memories about who they met. But why bother? Couldn't an attack spell have been delivered the same way? Why leave any of us alive?*

"Well that's just marvelous," Don decided, throwing his hands up. "Everest, you tell them."

So Everest quickly sketched out how Lysanias had helped stop the first war machine and shadow kin they had met. How the wanderers had felt their handling of the portal had been incorrect and turned against them, attacking them at random times to try and get revenge. Finally how Lysanias had dreamed of undead covering the land and how the girl that fell from the skyebourne city had been a light against them.

"So skyebourne are the people that live in those floating cities?" Vyzanth finally asked, nodding his understanding. "Interesting. I had seen them floating around, of course, but never thought much of them. And you say there's another one of these things about to be activated?" He pointed a thumb at the war machine.

"That's right. We need to discover where and get there before it can be made mobile, like this one was."

"You're just leaving? What about this gigantic thing sitting in the middle of the street? You can't just leave it here!"

"I suggest getting some wizards with spells to reshape metal to tear it to pieces," Don told him. "I'm not exactly clear on what Lysanias did to stop it, but you don't want it starting up again. It has a mind of its own, and it will probably start rampaging again."

Vyzanth considered, looking up at the thing. "The amount of metal we would get from it would make that worthwhile. We sorely need it."

*You and everyone else it seems.*

He went on. "We would need to guard it, set up a perimeter."

"Hey, I helped stop it, shouldn't part of the metal be mine?" the dragon called down. "This situation would have been much worse without me around."

Vyzanth looked to the group. "I'm not going to argue with a dragon," Everest told him. "But if you're going to tell him no, let me get out of the way first."

"We can work that out later," he called up to the beast. "You'll get a reward for your part in all this. In fact you should all be rewarded. Please, name your desire and if it is within my power, it shall be granted."

*How about a quiet place to take a nap? Oh right, I just got up.*

"Oh, we don't really need any rew-" Everest started to say.

Don shoved him. "What my friend here means is we don't need a *huge* reward, your majesty. Something small will do, I'm talking about just a trinket, merely a trifle."

Everest shoved him back. "What *my* friend means is we should help put out those fires and get the townspeople safe before we talk about rewards."

"You're sure it won't start moving again?" the king asked, nervously looking up at the thing.

"I'll keep an eye on it," the dragon assured them. "Go take care of the town."

And so the group went to see to the town. As Lysanias' spirit was still out it helped move rubble and smother fires, while the magic users created water to further that effort. After being assured the danger was over the townspeople pitched in to help, though more than one complaint/plea to the king about what the displaced people were going to do now was heard. For his part, Lysanias simply sat still somewhere safe, silently selecting questions to ask the universe about the other war machine. By the time the danger of the fire spreading had passed he had an answer.

"It's not far," he told the others. "A day's travel north. At least the way we do it."

"First thing directly north of here is that weird remnant-kin town," Vyzanth told them. "That's across the bay, I hope you have a boat."

"We have something better," Lysanias replied with no small pride. "We can make it across the bay easily."

"If you say so. I suppose it makes sense, though. Where else would you go to find a giant remnant?"

"Remnant-kin?" asked Don.

"Strange people. They made a town where some old industrial area was from before the fall. Lots of remnants in that area. Would you believe many that live there actually try to become remnants themselves?"

"No, really?" Everest couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"It's true. They have remnant parts put right inside their bodies."

"Oh, like the arm of that guy that attacked us last night?" Lysanias asked. "His arm looked strange, not just armored. Like it had come from a remnant."

"We've got a few around here," the king admitted. "But what's this about you being attacked last night?"

"Oh, that's not important," Don assured him quickly. "Just more shadow kin as it turned out. We should get going, actually."

Vyzanth looked a bit suspicious, but didn't press the issue. "I should as well. I'll head back to the castle and get some guards for that war machine. The guild presence isn't all that great here but someone must have a spell that can start tearing that thing down." He leaned over and dropped his voice. "At least, that's what they want me to

think. I know they're secretly watching my every move because of my, you know..." He pointed to his horns. *Yes, about those, and the wings, what exactly are you?* "They don't like a warlock being a king, but they can't exactly call me out on it. I live next to a gate to heaven, if they wanted me gone I would have been gone already. So they sneak around and I pretend not to notice." Louder he said, "I won't delay about getting rid of it."

"Excellent plan, your majesty."

"But do stop by the castle when you can. I was serious about that reward."

"You are most generous. Thank you." He bowed again, so the others followed suit.

"Good luck!" The king took to the air again and soon was out of sight.

"We should get going too, before any city guards that would recognize a couple of escaped prisoners show up," Don suggested. "That would be messy. Where did the wanderers go? We should say goodbye."

The group looked around, but not a wanderer was to be seen.

"Did they just slip away?" Elita asked, somewhat perturbed. "The nerve!"

"They seemed somewhat embarrassed," Everest pointed out. "Both that they helped to cause this destruction and then forgetting who was pulling their strings."

"They must have been under a spell similar to what brought the annunaki up here, following their 'great leader,'" Don suggested.

"They seemed to come out of it once they saw the war machine tearing things to bits. Just like the annunaki gave up after their 'great leader' fell. It makes sense," Lysanias agreed. "We would have understood, they didn't have to leave like a thief in the night."

"Hey, careful what you say there, Lysanias," Elita cautioned. "I did most of my work in the daylight anyway. Like a... what's the word?" She was snapping her fingers.

"Street sweeper?" Don suggested.

"Town crier?" Everest suggested.

"Baker?" Lysanias suggested.

"Politician! That's the word."

They all rolled their eyes.

"Still, would have liked trying a magical counter for the forgetting spell," Everest mused. "We might have gotten more information."

"Or maybe a more lethal response from our foe," Don told him. "I'll take living in ignorance for the moment."

"There is that."

"I just hope they aren't hunted down and killed for their 'betrayal' by whoever is doing all this," Elita added. "You have to admit they're probably the type."

"If we can take care of them quickly enough, it won't be a problem," Don replied.

"To that end, I'll get the balloon out," Lysanias told them. "This area seems large enough." *Good luck, Esta. I hope you stay out of trouble from now on. Maybe someday I can make it up to you, and your entire people.*

With his spirit thanked and the group once again in the air, heading north, Lysanias could finally sit and rest. He also thought about what he was doing wrong, why things seemed to always get the jump on him and what he could do differently. The problem was, nothing much came to mind.

*I need to find someone I can learn from that specializes in combat techniques. The trouble is there's so many ways things can attack, from magic to just flinging me about with a look. Hopefully that ghost won't be back any time soon, so at least all I'll have to worry about for the foreseeable future is magic. Everest can take care of that, so as long as we stick together it should be fine. But I have to get better at taking care of myself, relying on them all the time is unfair. They are going to want to go home at some point. Do I want to go with them? Live underground? I'm no dwarf, and I have made friends here, the alchemists. He sighed. One thing at a time.*

That day Lysanias meditated, healed himself the rest of the way along with the various cuts and bruises the others had taken. That done he replenished his stock of healing wards, and even managed a few spirit battery ones as well. *Far too few*, he decided, as the sun was setting. He slipped them into the dispenser, slightly depressed about just how few there were, given how much effort they took to create. *Every one takes a little out of me but they really are meant to shift my resources from a time of plenty to a leaner time. Always seems to be a lean time, so I hardly make any of them. At least they're holding a little more energy than they were when I first started making them. I'm getting a little better at that, thankfully.*

For the rest of the group the trip was somewhat boring, but at least it was fairly short. By noon the next day the other shore came into view and the group discussed how they would enter the city.

"I left my trumpet back home," Elita told them, "but perhaps you could improvise a drum to play as we descend?"

"Very funny," Lysanias deadpanned. "I mean are we just showing up, or going around the city and walking in?"

"Do we care if the balloon concept gets used elsewhere?" asked Everest.

"We stole the idea, I suppose it's fair game."

"Then let's just approach by the docks like any other ship. They are a port town, I'm sure they've seen airships and regular ships aplenty. We're just a smaller airship, that's all."

"I guess."

"Obviously we'll have to check the place out," Don cautioned. "If the war machine is already active we'll have to think of something else."

"Good point." Lysanias got out his telescope and peered ahead. "No fires, no giant metal constructs of death. I think we're fine."

Activity only stopped momentarily as the "mini-airship" came to rest on the end of a dock as men and machines looked over at it. The group climbed out and looked around as Lysanias put the balloon back into a contain ward.

"Weird place," remarked Everest, and Lysanias had to agree. They started towards the city, looking around as they walked. There were people and remnants of all kinds busy along the docks; hauling, stacking, selling, loading. Larger remnants were doing the heavy lifting while humans and smaller remnants supervised, and the whole place was a buzz of activity. Some remnants belched black smoke out their backs while others stood guzzling what looked like lamp oil before getting back to work. And the people were no less strange, as one in three seemed to have some sort of augmentation done to their bodies. It seemed anything was fair game for replacement, legs, arms, even noses on otherwise normal faces looked boxy and mechanical. Lysanias wasn't sure how to feel about this. *Are they trying to improve upon the Allfather's design? Or do they just want to fit in better here? Imagine throwing part of yourself away and having it replaced with a cold, unfeeling bit of metal. Isn't this mocking their creator? Like a human thinks they know better than the being that created the entire universe how their bodies should work? Not even we had that kind of arrogance, and we got wiped out? How are these people still alive? What, exactly, did we do that was so bad that required us all to be destroyed?*

"You're not kidding," Elita agreed, trying not to stare at the one with the replaced nose.

"Try not to get thrown in jail again," Don cautioned.

Lysanias glared at him, still fuming about these people flaunting themselves like this. "I'll just let any shadow kin kill me then, shall I?" *Solve everyone's problems that way.*

"Go into a back alley or something, do I have to teach you everything?"

"Now you tell me. Come on, let's see if we can find someone to tell us where to go to find someone in charge."

"Or at least find someone who can point out someone who can find someone to tell us where to go to find someone who can put us in touch with someone in charge," Everest allowed.

"I'm confused," Don admitted. "Say that again?"

"I'm not sure I can. There's a likely prospect." He pointed, and the group walked over to a man wearing rags who had a cup in front of him.

"Help out a 49er? Fell down a shaft," the man said, looking up at them with clouded eyes. He rattled the cup, which clicked with copper coins.

"You did what?" Lysanias asked, unsure what he was saying.

"Fell down a shaft."

"A mineshaft?" Don asked him.

"Yeah."

"You're lucky to be alive at all."

"What's a 49er?" Elita whispered to Lysanias.

"You're asking the wrong person," he whispered back.

"Oh, right, forgot who I was talking to."

"Not so sure," replied the man.

Don spilled some coins into his cup.

*Doesn't really solve his problem though, Lysanias thought sadly. He'll never have enough to afford magical healing, and he looks pretty old. Is there really nothing he can do but sit here and hope people take pity on him? You've got a crazy world on your hands, Allfather.*

"Wondered if you might tell us where to go to speak to someone in charge of this town," Don said after the man thanked him.

"Tell ya anything you want to know!"

There was a pause.

"Can you tell us where to go to find someone in charge?"

"Yup. Sure can."

Another pause. Don looked like he was struggling not to reach for the sword at his side. "Where can we go to find someone in charge of this city," he finally figured out he had to say, and did so through clenched teeth.

"Oh, that's easy. Walk that way until you reach the end of the docks area." He pointed. "You see one of them carts? Sit on it and tell it where you want to go. It'll take you there. You'll have to put some coins in though. There's a slot."

"Some kind of remnant transportation system?"

"What is?"

"These carts- never mind. Thanks a lot." He started to walk away.

"Sure thing," the beggar called after him.

"Some sort of memory issue, no doubt," Everest said sadly as they walked towards the edge of the docks and into the city.

"You think the church would help," Lysanias wondered. "They must have one around here. Even people making a mockery of their creator must still worship in some capacity or another."

"You would think that," Don agreed. "But you would be wrong. About the church just stepping in to help, I mean. I have no idea if these people worship or not anymore. In theory, the church would have to use magic, and thus charge the same rates as the guild. It's been a point of contention between them for some time."

"I can't imagine why."

The man was as good as his word, some strange looking machines came into view and the group looked them over. One pulled away from the group and came over to them. Not that any of them know what one was, but it was basically a golf cart.

"Need to get someplace?" it asked.

"We need to see someone in charge," Everest told it.

"Not a problem. Hop on! I'll get you there for three embers."

"I guess that's reasonable," Don allowed.

"Hey, everybody's got to eat," the cart told him. Don shrugged and fed three coins into the slot. "Great, thanks. All aboard!"

The group climbed on and the cart took off down the street, which was paved fairly well.

"We're now leaving the docks," the cart told them. "To your right you'll see one of the many factories that dot the area, churning out remnants day and night. At least, they used to when resources were more plentiful."

"Would anyone around here be willing to buy a bunch of metal?" Lysanias asked it.

"Would they? You bet they would. If you have metal to sell I'd take you to any number of refineries, free of charge!"

"Really?" Don asked, somewhat suspicious of this.

"Sure. I'd get a cut of the profits from it as a finder's fee."

"Ah." He nodded.

"Anyway, to your left is our remnant bar, but of course humans are welcome and many dishes are offered that appeal to even the most organic of beings. Coming up on your right..." The cart droned on about the town, pointing out various things like statues of fallen remnants that had done great works, or parks where "organics" could play with their "living offspring." Lysanias noticed shiny things stuck on top of the houses, and asked about them.

"They're solar panels all right," the cart agreed. "You're familiar with remnant technology then?"

"I've run into it once or twice. You know, I never did figure out what those circular barrel things were. You know, those metal things attached to the roofs of all the houses in Farpoint? I recognize windmills now, but I've never seen anything like that again."

"I remember those," Everest told him with a snap of his fingers. "I think they were hot water dispensers."

"Hot water what?"

"Sure. They were metal, right? Pour some water in, the sun heats it up during the day, and you've got some hot water to do your dishes in or have a bath with at night. Each had a pipe running into the house, probably some sort of valve at the bottom. Yeah, hot water, has to be."

"They would really climb up to their roofs to pour water into something like that?"

"Maybe they just collected rain water? I couldn't think of anything else they could be."

"Maybe I'll teleport back and ask sometime."

"Here we are," the cart announced. "The council chamber."

"Thanks," Elita told the cart, giving it a pat on the side. "I enjoyed the tour."

"Ride with us again anytime!" It beeped twice and zoomed away.

"What a weird thing. I like it," she said with a grin. "Zipping about with moving my legs."

"Why do you think I'm always after a pony?" Lysanias joked.

"Are you?"

"Oh sure, ask anybody. Let's go see who is in charge around here."

Up the steps and into the several story building the group came upon another waiting room, but were assured that a pair of representatives would be available soon. Lysanias didn't waste the time, asking the universe as he sat there which direction they would have to go in to find the last war machine.

## *Underground*

They didn't wait long before a woman in a fairly well made and tailored suit came out, a remnant at her side. Her hair fell to her shoulders and she was somewhat past her prime, but carried herself well. The remnant was rather boxy and squeaked a bit as it walked. It had a vague face, with a mechanical jaw and strange, creepy looking eyes that didn't blink.

"Welcome to the remnant coast," the woman said to them.

"And to the town of Humnant," the remnant said.

"I'm Saleen, and this is tick-tock, we'll be your representatives for today. If you would like to come this way?" She indicated they should join her, and they followed her down the hall into a conference room.

"What can we do for you?" Tick-tock asked them.

"That may take some explaining," Don told them. "The short of it is, somewhere near here is a giant war machine from before the chaos moon arrived. We need to find it and make sure a group of shadow like beings from another world don't get hold of it so that a skybourne that has probably been possessed by one of them doesn't unleash it along with a horde of undead that will sweep across the land like a raging tide."

There was a moment of silence.

"If it helps, we've already dealt with two of them," Everest added.

"And it has to be done quickly," Elita put in. "Something was happening to the skybourne city I left and that was years ago. Their plan could be put into action at any time."

"Perhaps we should hear the longer version?" suggested Saleen after a moment of trying to process all that. "First of all what's a skybourne?"

## Monster Cable

When: After the somewhat lengthy full explanation

Where: Government building conference room

Don summarized the recent events as much as he could, answering the two official's questions and impressing upon them the seriousness of an attack by the remaining war machine. On the one hand they didn't dismiss the claims outright, which was a good thing. On the other, neither had any inkling where something like that would be found.

"And you say your abilities told you it was somewhere underground?" asked Tick-tock.

"That's right."

"What exactly did your 'ability' show you?" it pressed. "Was it some kind of vision? A pull like a magnet towards steel?"

*Hey, I actually know what I magnet is, thanks to joining the RED guild. Amazing, I actually understood a reference to something that was discovered after I wen to sleep.* "No, after I got into town I asked the universe where to go in order to find the war machine. I got back a single word answer. Underground."

"Ah, I see. So it may not be underground, just you being underground might lead you to it."

"What's this?" asked Elita.

"Perhaps you meet someone in the sewers that has seen something like that in their travels," Tick-tock further postulated. "Or perhaps you find a portal somewhere underground that leads to the location."

"I too would put a lot of caution on such an indirect answer," agreed Saleen. "Though a magical portal would be a bit of a stretch, Tick-tock."

"I merely seek to cover all possibilities."

"I can narrow it down further with some time," Lysanias told them. "I just got that as a starting point now that we've arrived. I wanted to warn the town as quickly as possible, given the other was basically rolling into the last town we went to looking for one."

"I can have extra forces drawn up quickly in the event of an attack. We can set some spotters near the borders of the town as well. What do you directly need from us?" Tick-tock asked.

"We've delivered our warning. I'm happy to provide more details, for that I just need a quiet room I can meditate in for maybe half an hour."

Tick-tock tilted his head. "Just updating my records for what rooms are free. Ah, yes, there's a small conference room that won't be needed for at least an hour. We can put you there and come get you later."

"That would be fine."

"Please, come this way."

The group walked through the halls, noting that everyone traveled in a pair, one humanoid (he saw a dwarf and a bird person along with the normal humans) and one remnant. "What's with the pairings?" asked Elita after passing yet another couple.

"Our system of government has evolved to the point where one living being and one remnant are paired," Tick-tock explained. "Then, that unit effectively casts one vote on any major issue, and it simplifies governmental functioning by making sure a representative of each species is involved in every issue from the beginning."

"Sounds tiresome. What if you don't agree on something?"

"Then the pair must either come to terms and compromise or forgo their vote on that issue."

"Sounds like twice the paperwork," Everest remarked.

"Humans do paperwork," Saleen told them with a grimace. "Remnants get printouts."

"And here we are," Tick-tock told them, showing them into the room. It had a fairly small table and set of chairs, but Lysanias didn't need anything fancy. "We will return in a half hour to learn of your progress."

"We'll be waiting," Don told them.

Lysanias got as comfortable as he could, sitting on one of the hard plastic chairs around the table. "I'll ask how far underground we need to go," he announced. "That should give us some idea. I can ask how far in each direction into the town after that. Those three measurements should give a fairly good idea where it can be found. Also if I only get an answer to how far down in the next half hour they can probably figure it out from there."

"Whatever you think is best, lad."

So Lysanias closed his eyes and composed his question, casting it out into the universe to learn what he needed to know. But no more than two minutes had passed when he heard a grinding noise and the walls of the conference room suddenly lifted, revealing several large remnants surrounding them. All had sleek looking guns, and all were pointed at the group. The remnants themselves were vaguely person shaped, with normal limbs, but almost as if whatever built them was trying to see what form was best their proportions were different. One had far longer arms than another, while one with shorter limbs had a lot of tubes and shiny things sticking out of their head.

"I told you not to get us thrown in prison again!" Don angrily chided Lysanias. "Also, why do you never see this sort of thing coming?"

"Quiet, dwarf," ordered one remnant. "We will ask the questions here. For now, stay where you are and do not reach for any weapons. We also know what magic looks like, and will fire upon you if you begin to cast a spell. Know that our reaction times are far in excess of human norms, you would not get out a single syllable."

*Oh, we're back to not understanding what people are saying. I've missed that. I really have. No, what's the opposite of that?*

"How did you learn about the dreadnaught?" another demanded. "We have told no organic about it."

"Who among us told you? Who is the traitor?" demanded another.

"What is your real purpose in coming here?" a third demanded. "Do you wish to steal it? Use it for your own ends?"

"One question at a time," Don shouted back at them. "We were telling you the truth, we want to warn against further attacks by these things. Are you saying you've found it already? Has it been secured? Is it in any position to attack?"

"We will ask the questions," yet another said.

*Wait, are they going around the room in order? So the next one to speak should be that one, right?*

Elita barked a laugh. "So much for cooperation among you. You didn't tell 'an organic?' And I don't see any human representatives here, meaning that half your own government doesn't know about it, do they? That's a great way to foster cooperation, keep secrets from the people you're supposed to be working together with."

"Is this sarcasm?" asked one, out of the sequence. "My sarcasm detector is acting up, so I can't really be sure." It banged the side of its head.

"Now is not the time, Power-switch."

"Why do we even include that guy?" asked one of the remnant beside it.

"They're a good shot?"

"Quiet!" came from the next one in sequence. "You will come with us to be interrogated. You will tell us who has betrayed us, and then they will be eliminated. If we are not satisfied with your reason for coming here, you will be eliminated. Organics possessing knowledge of the dreadnaught's existence is too dangerous."

"What about the two that come back for us a half hour from now?" Everest asked.

"Making us disappear is only going to worsen your problems."

"They will be told your 'ability' told you that you were mistaken, and left. They will not inquire further."

*That doesn't sound ominous. They won't inquire because they'll believe the story, or because they know not believing the story is bad for their health? Were they watching us, how do these guys know what we talked about in that room? Very curious. "Wait a second, what if I can prove to you what I say is true? Will you believe me then?"*

"He's right! You know magic exists, but you don't believe our story?" Elita realized.

"That's a conflict in terms, isn't it? Magic could have just as easily told us about the war

machine, if they hadn't already faced two of them. Why are you so sure there's someone working against you?"

"There have been signs. Now move. The one called Lysanias will be interrogated first. If he can prove what he says we will consider releasing you."

*If you don't consider releasing us, I'll just get out my mountain spirit that you can't see and have it tear you to pieces.* Lysanias paused. *Am I getting more violent? This world must be rubbing off on me. I suppose it's just about all I've been exposed to since I woke up. That and Amy's body. Not the time, Lysanias.*

The group was herded past the confines of the room and the walls were returned, so two remnants walked in front of the group and three behind. The passageways here were dusty and full of cobwebs, obviously "secret passageways" that only the remnants knew about. And didn't care about keeping clean because they didn't have to breathe.

"Even more examples of trust and sharing information," Elita managed after a bout of sneezing. "Wonderful."

"It is necessary. Now be quiet."

"That's what they all say." She sneezed again, just to spite them.

They took an elevator down and Lysanias was separated from the group, put into a chair and tied down with a thick chain. Obviously all his stuff had been taken, and he was searched for hidden weapons. Finding none the remnant shoved him down and started tying him up quite efficiently. The room was stark, with only a single bulb casting light, and the remnants took positions around their captive once he was secured. Their weapons were not trained on him, but they weren't set down or anything either. Some of them, he noticed, couldn't be set down because they were the remnant's other arm. *That must be somewhat inconvenient.*

"You aren't making it easy for me to want to help you," he observed.

"Your wanting to help us is not a requirement. Now, you will be given the opportunity to prove you are telling the truth. Either give up the traitor with your 'abilities' or just tell us who it is. We will verify the information and your fate will be decided."

"What if there is no traitor?" he protested. "What if I have to prove my abilities told me about the war machine instead? And we just want to keep the town safe. I've already destroyed two war machines, this one may be the only one left. It has to be destroyed for the good of the world. You must know that, if you've seen it!"

"If we determine you legitimately do not know or cannot discover the identity of the traitor another test can be devised. Proving you are sincere in wanting to destroy the dreadnaught and have no designs on it for your own benefit will be more difficult, but we will entertain the idea."

*I think I could prove that. I show them the pieces of the one we tore apart- wait, wouldn't that be like showing me a human skull as proof of something? And if it is the only one left, and they consider it "family" because it's a remnant like them... That could backfire on me, big time. What if they put me on trial for murdering... two war machines? Who knows what they might be thinking? "But either way you're going to torture me, is that it?" He made a show of struggling against the chains, not that they could really hold him if he didn't want them to.*

"No."

"As I- No?" He did a double take.

"We will torture the others and make you watch."

"What?"

"It has been proven throughout history that physical harm does not produce desired results. However, we have observed many instances of human 'empathy,' that is, a desire to spare *others* pain. We believe this 'empathy' can be harnessed to produce the result direct physical harm cannot. As they will not be asked any questions, they cannot give up information to make the torture stop. Only you will have that capability."

Lysanias regarded the group. "You really are just machines, aren't you? Because that's cold, really."

"We feel certain emotions, as you do. But this matter is of the utmost importance to us. Have you actually seen a dreadnaught? Can you imagine the harm one would cause were it to be loosed upon the world? We must take every precaution."

*I agree, but this is still going too far.* "Yes, I have. Why do you think I want it destroyed?"

"So you say. Are you going to convince us or shall we bring in the monitors so you can see your friends? Or would having them before you be more effective? We will have to gauge the situation carefully."

"I'll have to cast a spell first, unless you want to be here for hours. I'm not very good at this. And don't get twitchy, each question I ask takes ten minutes to answer. I'm not stalling, I'm just waiting for the universe to get back to me." *Odd that it does take so long. I mean, it's a constant time no matter what question I ask. Where is the information coming from that a round trip takes such an exact amount of time? I mean the universe is right there, all around me. Never thought about that before. It's never a minute for an easy question, twenty minutes for a hard one. That doesn't even- it takes ten minutes to make a ward, too. Exactly ten minutes, if I only do nine minutes of work it doesn't work. How does it know how long I've worked on it? Shouldn't it be done when it's done? Something fishy going on here...*

"Know that if you seek to free yourself, hidden weapons will open fire. Also the chair can be electrified, and the air can be laced with poison gas. Fire will shoot out of the floor."

Lysanias came back to the conversation at hand. *I'll have to think about that later.* "I get the picture, you've covered your bases in terms of magic. Something will get me if I try to get out of here." *You hope.* "Just let me concentrate."

"You may proceed."

Lysanias drew upon his magic, shaping a spell but wishing he could move. *This is going to cut the effectiveness a little. Which is another thing, why does moving my hand around help in harnessing magic? Does it have eyes? Can it see me not waving my hand about and partially ignore me? Amazing what being tied up does for one's clarity. Everything I do raises a million questions. Can't be helped, I guess. Also it would have been better if Elita could have done this part, so I wasn't feeling the drag of holding onto this spell while trying to use another ability. Guess I should be thankful I can do both in the first place. Thanks, Allfather, oh that's right you destroyed almost everyone like me.* "Allow my skill to be augmented," he cast, throwing energy into the magic. He felt the spell take hold and now concentrated on the questions that would get him out of this.

*"Is there a traitor to the remnant cause, as the remnants before me believe?"*

No.

*Great, I knew it. Now what? But they seemed so sure... Am I asking the wrong question? "Does a being in this area, remnant or otherwise, act in such a way as to make the remnants here believe they are a traitor?"*

Yes

*Ah hah. Curious. What could-* Lysanias shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cold chain or chair he was sitting on. *I really hope I'm not right. "Is there a possessed remnant among-" No wait, that will take two questions. Assume there is, get two answers for the price of one. "What is the name of the currently possessed remnant that is nearest to me?"*

*Speaker-wire*

*And apparently remnants can be possessed just like everybody else. And why wouldn't they?* "It's not what you think," Lysanias told the impatient remnants still around him now that a half hour had passed. "The one working against you is possessed by a shadow kin. They don't know what they're doing."

"You have a name?"

"Are you just going to rush off? This shadow kin gets wind of this, and they'll just jump to a new body. We have to be smart about this, and figure out how to deal with the situation carefully." He paused. "Do you even know what a shadow kin is? How dangerous they are? They're from another world, I don't even know all they can do."

"You have a name?"

"Listen to me! It's just a shadow until it possess someone. A certain type of light can immobilize them but it requires a great intensity. Some of the knives you took from us are made of the stuff, if you can duplicate it. If not, tell me how you stab a remnant with a knife? It's the only other thing we've seen work."

"I wondered what the purpose of that glowing knife was," one said to the other.

"Quiet!"

"You have a name?"

*This guy is relentless.* "Fine, you mess this up for yourselves and I'm not responsible for what happens. The name I got was Speaker-wire, are you happy?" Lysanias felt the spell leave him, the purpose for the magic now passed so he figured they must be convinced.

The remnants shared a look around the room. "There is a worker by that designation that has access," the one in front of Lysanias admitted. "This of course proves nothing. Say that your statements are accurate, how can you go about proving possession by this shadow kin?"

"That's a good question," he admitted, thinking. "Somehow we have to keep it from just leaving when it feels in danger, attaching to someone else, and simply walking away. How do you cage a shadow?"

"Is it a creature like a darque?" asked the one to the left.

"I've heard that name before, but I've never seen a darque," admitted Lysanias. "So I can't give you a good answer to that question. I can tell you what I've seen shadow kin do, how they reacted to certain things. But they come from another world, the world of the wanderers. They may be able to do things we don't expect shadow like creatures from this world to be able to do."

"Then you must think of a solution, quickly," said the one on the right.

*Oh sure, make me do all the work.* "I'll see what I can come up with." He thought a moment, going over what abilities he had and how he could use the limited amount of the solidified light to his best advantage. "We first have to get him away from everyone. If someone they already knows can slap a ward on them, taking them by surprise, the shadow kin should go inside too. There wouldn't be time for it to get away. Then we take it into my personal dimension and I let them out. Then we just have to figure out how to get them unpossessed."

"I don't understand what half those words mean," complained one.

"Me either, but I have a rather obvious question. What stops the shadow kin from possessing you?" another asked.

"My shoes," he answered, wiggling his feet. "It's not very comfortable to walk on, but inside my shoes is a layer of the solidified light that seems to paralyze them. They can't possess me because of it." *At least, none has succeeded that I know of. Or has even tried, for that matter. I suppose they could be able to but just waiting for the best moment. Great, now I'm even more depressed.*

The one in front yanked his shoe off and looked inside it. As he said, there was a glow from the inside, and he showed the others.

"Somewhat elaborate, if this is a trick," the one said.

"Given what is at stake, the more elaborate the better," another answered.

"And your friends have these inserts as well?"

"All but Elita. She joined us after we made them."

"What stops her from being possessed?"

"Nothing, I guess. But usually any we find we just attack, they don't get a lot of time to go jumping bodies."

"So if any of us went with you to this 'personal dimension' you speak of, there would be a chance one of us could become possessed instead?"

“Yes. But that would at least prove my point, wouldn’t it? As long as one witness comes, one other could be possessed and you would know I speak the truth.”

“How will we know, if Speaker-wire still functions after this, that it was not some clever ruse perpetrated by magic?”

“If it’s anything like human possession, they won’t remember much that was done while they were possessed. Remnants, normal ones, well you’re machines right? I can’t believe you would forget things like a person does.”

“Only what we choose to purge from our memory banks,” explained one. “Even our storage space is not unlimited.”

“That’s probably the only proof I can offer.”

“Say you capture Speaker-wire. What then? They could simply pretend to not be possessed, and as you say your knife will not have the same effectiveness on us.”

“One thing at a time. Perhaps we can simply talk to it, convince it being trapped in my personal dimension for eternity isn’t the way to go and offer to let it out if it cooperates?”

“But it could always find its way back here.”

“So let me destroy the war machine as I wish, and it’ll have no reason to!”

“We cannot allow you to destroy our brethren. We will explain when you are reunited with your friends.”

“What?” Lysanias felt the chains being loosened, and they clattered to the floor. “You believe me!”

“Your friends gave similar accounts. If this story was coached, someone has done a fantastic job getting all four of you to tell a coherent narrative. Also all your vital signs were monitored, and no physiological signs of deception were detected. You all believe you are telling the truth as you know it. Ergo there is a danger and a solution must be reached. Perhaps your friends will have other ideas and this danger can be neutralized.”

Lysanias stared at them. “You tricked me! You had no intention of harming my friends. You were questioning them at the same time as you were questioning me!”

“Correct. You would have been shown computer simulations depicting them in great pain, but they would have been shown similar scenes of you in great pain, had you not cooperated as you did. We are not monsters, but the secret of the behemoth must be maintained. I hope you can forgive the deception, given the circumstances?” *Shown what now? Some kind of illusion I guess?* “As your intentions seem true we will, for the moment, allow you guest access to our network and allow you to brainstorm with your fiends possible solutions to the possession problem.”

*Access to what, and why do I get an image of lighting shooting out of my head for some reason? Ah well, let’s go before they change their minds.* Lysanias stood up. “Lead the way!”

## Sing Like a Birdy

When: A moment of traversing hallways later

Where: Secret part of the remnant/human government building

“When did *you* realize it was a trick?” asked Don, once the group was back together. They were now seated in another conference room, this one with paint peeling from the walls, low illumination, and dust thick everywhere. “I, of course, realized it right away.”

“Right away, huh?” asked Everest, not buying it for a second.

“Oh yeah. Of course I played along, made a good show of it.”

“Is that what all that girly screaming was from the next room?” Elita asked slyly. “You making a good show of it?”

“I never did!”

“I heard something! It wasn’t me, the only girl of the group, screaming. So it had to be you.”

“And what about you then? I suppose you saw through them even before we got down here in the elevator?”

She sniffed. “Even better. I simply resolved to not break, no matter what horrible imagery they showed me. Yes, not even the sight of your arms being ripped out of their sockets would make me fold. Even if they scooped out your eyeballs and poured hot lead into your now empty eye sockets, I resolved not to say a single word. In fact I might have even suggested some things, like, like, like putting maggots down your ears or messing with your head by telling you that your parents had horrible fashion sense.”

“If we could get back to the matter at hand?” Lysanias pleaded, wondering when he had lost control of the situation. “There’s a shadow kin possessed remnant running around out there, and we need to do something about it.”

“Why wouldn’t just stabbing it work?” Elita asked. “It has in the past, right?”

“In the first place our knives were not meant for chopping through metal, only flesh,” Everest told her. “So actually stabbing them is a bit of an issue. Let’s say we did though. Where is a shadow kin when it possesses someone?”

“Oh, er, I don’t know.”

“Neither do I, sad to say, but let’s assume inside the body somehow. Which in most cases is meat.”

“I could go for some meat,” Don mused. “A roast pig perhaps?” He smacked his lips.

“Anyway, presumably the shadow kin is inside the body of the remnant just as it would be inside one of us. But stick a knife into a remnant chest and what do they care? You can see on some of them that the chest area is just empty space. The ‘inside’ of their bodies is the thickness of the metal that makes them up. There’s no meat there.”

“Venison, slathered with gravy, thick slices of potato on the side dripping with butter. Fork in one hand, and in the other, a huge mug of beer with foam up to-” He made a gesture with his hand, fingers and thumb held as far apart as they could be.

“Would you stop that?! So you see the trouble.”

“I think I do.”

“So, ideas?” Lysanias pressed, pressing both hands flat on the table.

“A steak, thick as my thumbs and dripping juices, lightly peppered, piled high with onions, crusty bread on the side-”

“Shut up about food!”

“Wait a second!” Elita cried, standing up suddenly. Her chair toppled over and everyone jumped.

“What, what is it? Are we under attack?” Don tensed up, looking around the room.

"No, no. Why don't we do the same thing? Remnants have to 'eat' don't they? I saw some drinking some kind of fluid out by the docks, and others seem to burn wood or at least produce some kind of smoke like they have an internal fire. Do the same thing- sneak some of the light into the 'fuel' it consumes and that should immobilize the shadow kin long enough to take it out!" She triumphantly smiled at the group, thinking she had solved it.

"Wouldn't work," the remnant at the door said to her. "Speaker-wire is a magic type."

"A what?"

"They run on magic. There aren't many of them, but they don't have to consume anything like most. They just run. They can do spells, too."

She righted and then sank down into her chair. "Of course they can."

Lysanias nodded. "It makes sense. If I was a shadow kin, I would want the best person available to possess. That means a magic user. Remember what the first one said to me, Don? Everest? Something like 'if only I had known you were around.'"

"Magic is a survival trait," the remnant agreed. "It is logical that all other variables being equal, a magic user would be chosen. Pursuant to this we estimate that if humanity could stop warring with itself for five minutes eventually all people should be able to do magic. It is our hope one day all remnants will as well."

"How do you figure?" asked Everest.

"Because those with magic have a better chance at survival," they explained. "Thus, those with magic would be more apt to have children, and have those children survive to have children. As magical ability tends to follow family lines it then becomes more and more likely all people will be magic users at some point in the future. And once the remnant magic systems prove themselves reliable, all remnants can be upgraded to use that system. We are, after all, more flexible than organics in that regard."

"I remember reading a story once, from before the chaos moon. Not that many old books survived of course but there must have been millions of copies of this one series printed. You find it everywhere there are preserved ruins, so we've managed to piece it together page by page. It had magic users hiding out while the more numerous non-magical 'wiggles' or something they were called ruled the world. Always thought it was a bit unrealistic, given survival of the fittest. The magic users would have taken over thousands of years before, and there would be no 'wiggles' left. That's what I thought when I read it..."

Lysanias' eyes lit up. "Like the annunaki. They're all magic users, according to Yttrius. Which makes sense, they haven't gone through the upheavals we on the surface have, so they had a chance to basically 'breed out' anyone that couldn't do magic."

"After all," Elita asked, "all things being equal who would I choose to have kids with? A mage or a non-magic user? Well, I would rather my kids be magic users so the choice is obvious."

*Doesn't that make me the most desirable man in the world?*

"But wouldn't your kids all be skyebourne, like you?" Everest asked.

"Yes, you know what I mean. If I was just a regular person, I'm saying."

*Maybe we should get them down here, and eventually turn everybody into a skyebourne? But we are off track again.* "If we could once again return to the topic at hand?" Lysanias reminded them. "The remnant?"

There was a glum silence as the group mulled it over.

"What if we just went and, I don't know, talked to it?" Elita suggested.

Both Don and Everest looked at each other and burst out laughing, pounding the table with their heads down. Lysanias tried to keep himself from chuckling, but didn't manage it very well.

"What? I'm serious. What do we really know about these things?"

"They want to destroy us?" Lysanias offered.

"Do they? But why? What's in it for them? Why did they attack the wanderers, driving them into this world? Does someone lead them? Maybe the one that took over the skybourne as we assume? Or is that one just another soldier that happened to get into a city somehow? What do they really want? Maybe we can give it to them!"

"I suppose she has a point," Lysanias admitted. "What do we really know about them?"

"What we've observed, obviously," Everest countered.

"But all we've learned about them originally came from the wanderers. How do we know they understood the shadow kin any better than we do? How do we know they caused the downfall of the world the wanderers left? Perhaps they wanted the portal for the same reason- to escape a dying world. The shadow kin may not have been a cause, but another group of refugees just trying to survive."

"What about their attacks now?" Don pressed. "That's not the actions of a kind and loving race."

"But it is the behavior of a race on the brink of extinction," countered Lysanias. "Think of the wanderers attacking us after we closed their portal. It turned out they were magically compelled, but they must have wanted to strike out at us in the first place. Wanderers have the advantage of being able to easily communicate with us. Shadow Kin have to possess people, which certainly wouldn't endear them to any species. If I hadn't worked with Esta before they started attacking us, wouldn't I believe of them what we believe of shadow kin now? That they are simply evil creatures?"

The others considered. "Let's say we do just go talk to the thing?" Don asked. "What could go wrong?"

"It could flee," Everest started counting on his fingers. "It could attack, then flee. It could actually talk and lie to us. It could talk and tell us the truth."

"The first two are the same if we try to immobilize it or somehow keep the shadow kin from leaving the remnant it's in now," Elita figured. "So we've only gained options not lost them."

"We could counter them as well," admitted Everest. "If remnants in the area drifted off before we showed up, they might not notice. With no one else around to possess, it might be more inclined to speak with us."

"And if only Elita is around, she would be bait," Don gleefully announced. "The shadow kin possesses her, all we have to do is stab her and then finish it off when it's immobile. You wouldn't mind a minor stabbing for the good of the world, would you?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Unless it teleports away first using my magic," Elita cautioned. "Or just blows you all up. Do you really want to chance it getting ahold of me? It might not care how many spells are bouncing around its head."

"Oh. Maybe you should stay here."

"You think?"

"Wait, I can simply negate any magic she tried to do," protested Everest. "Don can stab her, Lysanias can stab the shadow kin and then banish it. A plan with no drawbacks."

"Apart from me being stabbed."

"A plan with no drawbacks!"

"I see how it is."

"Is your plan then to simply speak to Speaker-wire?" the remnant asked.

The group shared a look and Lysanias nodded. "I think it's all we've got. I have no idea how to expel the shadow kin, if that's even possible. Destroying the remnant is out, it'll just go into another one. If it decides to attack, well, maybe Elita's light spell can damage it or-"

"Wait a moment, I'm getting a message," the remnant interrupted. "That's odd."

"What is?" asked Everest.

"It's from Speaker-wire. The message reads- 'Lysanias and company, just get down here and stop all this pointless mewling. I'll tell you what you need to know, I'm getting tired of all this. Just come see me!' This does not bode well."

"I'll say!" Elita admitted. "It knew we were here? How?"

"There's every indication our foe is watching us somehow," Lysanias admitted. "That's how they always knew the best time to attack us. Come on, just show us where they are."

"Very well. But I am ordering all remnants out of the area just to be sure."

"That's for the best," Don agreed, getting up. "Lead the way."

The remnant took the group down the elevator again, this time far deeper than they had previously gone.

"Do you want wards?" Lysanias asked the group, thinking ahead for once in his life. It felt real good, like he was making a difference, making it right.

"Let's play it straight," Everest suggested. "We are going to talk. Let's not be hasty because we think we're protected. Going down without anything like that will keep us cautious and remind us why we're there."

"Your choice. I'm still getting my shield out." He did.

"That's a defensive item only, so that's fine."

*So are my armor wards, but whatever. And my shield has that cutting edge, but I get what he means.*

Stepping out into a large chamber the group saw that this section of space had been cleared by hand, revealing a mostly intact war machine. Scaffolds surrounded the machine and the walls of the cavern that had been carved around it, and spotlights illuminated the enormous space as best they could. Lysanias stared at the machine.

"Is it functional?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Not yet. We found it while doing a seismographic reading of the area looking for mineable deposits. What it revealed was a large sphere of metal that turned out to be a dreadnaught. We decided it would be in our best interests to attempt repairs and work to that end has proceeded ever since."

"Why revive something like that?" Everest asked. "And why hide it from the humans you're supposed to be working side by side with?"

"Because we know how they would use it," the remnant replied. "And we know how we would use it. Humanity has shown they do not like people other than themselves. They do not even like other people who are 99% like themselves, such as having a different skin tone or slightly different facial features. We know one day that such ideas may once again take precedence in their minds, now that things have stabilized to a degree. Also, resources become more scarce, and history shows organics tend to war over resources rather than simply trying to share them equally."

"You could become resources," Everest rightly guessed.

"Our metal bodies could be melted into any number of things," the remnant agreed. "If the day comes we need to defend ourselves, having a remnant of this size and capabilities could mean the difference between survival and extinction for our race."

Lysanias looked questioningly at Everest. "They're right, at least according to what history I've seen recorded. A war such as they describe could indeed come. I don't blame them for preparing."

"War never changes," Elita said with a shake of her head.

"Indeed. I will go no further. All remnants normally assigned to this area have been evacuated to the surface. There are few access points to this location, they have been closed off. Hopefully this will serve to contain the 'shadow kin' and allow you to have a peaceful dialog without the possibility of it escaping. Though if it is anything like a darque it can probably slip through even the smallest crack and escape. Thus I will wish you success in this endeavor."

"Thanks," Lysanias said sarcastically. The remnant stepped back into the elevator.

"Wait a second, how will you know to come and get us?" Everest protested. "If we do have to destroy Speaker-wire, we have no way to signal you!"

"I will return in one hour. Will that be sufficient?"

"It'll do. See you then."

They nodded and the door closed.

"Ah, they're finally gone," said a voice out of the darkness. "Took you long enough to come down here." The group spun, and there stood Speaker-wire. Magical energy, in the form of magical circles spinning about their feet, lit the area. "The question foremost on my mind is, are you here to actually talk or fight?"

"We would rather not fight," Don told it. "And I'm pretty sure we have you at a disadvantage."

"Perhaps. But I see you have no weapons out, not that you need them anymore, but still." The magical energies around them vanished. "So let's talk."

"Who are you?" Everest asked.

"At the moment, I'm Speaker-wire. We tend not to have much higher thought process when we're not attached to someone. We're much clearer thinkers when we are."

"That's why they don't remember what they did when possessed?" asked Lysanias. "You're doing the thinking for them!"

"I've no idea. Once I leave a host I typically don't stick around to see how they react afterwards. Makes sense though."

"Fair enough," allowed Don. "But let's cut to the big questions. What do you want?"

"Want? What all livings things want- to keep living."

"And did you destroy the world of the wanderers, as they believe?"

The remnant shook their head. "That was not our doing. Know that I am telling you this only because I have been ordered to." They held up a sheet of paper, folded into thirds. "It came a short time ago, apparently you've annoyed them enough they just want to force a confrontation with you. But I'm getting ahead of myself. To return to the world we came from, a being far in excess of our capabilities set their sights on it. However, before they began their attack they contacted us and gave us a choice. Help with that world's destruction and get to move from world to world along with it, remaining alive, or perish as the world did."

"And you took the deal," Everest unnecessarily stated.

"We did. Little did we know another option would present itself. The option the 'wanderers,' as they call themselves now, took. Leaving the world through the portal. Had we worked together more of both of our race could have escaped. But no, we prevented their access as much as we could, and then were commanded to follow and hunt down those that escaped. Probably to make sure the word about our 'king' didn't spread and allow other worlds advance notice they were in danger."

"So even here?" Elita asked. "This undead and skybourne islands spreading death isn't just some insane person but a force from outside our world? And for whatever reason it wants this world destroyed like the world of the wanderers?"

"I have come to believe all worlds are in danger, this being is that powerful. But I feel they are also constrained, and they chafe at such constraints. Hence this letter to me, allowing me to give you this information."

"So where are they? *What* are they?" asked Don.

"You have at least part of that information. A skybourne city, the grandest and largest, where the ruler of those people resides. As to what, I do not know myself. Only that they have some plan for this world, as they did with mine. To turn it black and lifeless."

“And our group can defeat them?” Elita demanded.

“The king believes that. I do not know why you four have been singled out. Only that you have.”

“I see,” Don said thoughtfully, stroking his beard. “So what were you doing down here and what are your plans now?”

“That much should be obvious. I was to collect information on how ready the dreadnought was, and assist if I could in the repair efforts. The king no longer has need of the machine, if they ever did, and so invites you to come and face them. I will simply depart and look for a more suitable host knowing that either my time is short anyway, or this world will be saved and I will no longer need to worry about retaliation from the king.”

“What more suitable host?” Everest demanded. “That body isn’t good enough for you?”

“You do not understand. Probably the wanderers have told you we are some kind of monsters. We are not. I do not like inhabiting those who are capable. Usually my kind seeks out those *incapable* of living on their own, and who have no real prospects.”

“Like who?” Don wondered.

“Those born simple, or without their senses. Those who have gone mad or who wish to only cause others pain. These we take over without reservation, giving their bodies a chance to be useful to others while we serve as their minds. In a perfect world, our existence would never be known but to a few, and those would accept our role, even cheer it. I can see why the wanderers would think us monsters. When forced out the people we inhabited went back to being simple or mad. They may have thought we caused this, by nature of our possession. Then the king forced us to be something we are not, further driving a wedge between our people. Now at least I can return to my purpose. I expect my life to be short, either because you lose and the king retaliates against me for betraying their command, or because you lose and this world is consumed as mine was.”

“We could win,” Elita hastily assured them.

“Do you really believe that?”

Her eyes lowered. “I don’t know.”

“I have told you what I can,” Speaker-wire told them, sitting down on the floor.

“You have forty seven minutes until the area is unsealed. Do with me what you will, and tell the others what you will. I can say no more in my defense than I already have.”

Lysanias turned away from the remnant, that ball of ice in his stomach having returned. *I’ve killed more than I thought. I thought I was saving those people these shadow kin possessed, but it turned out I was just causing more deaths. If this one isn’t lying, and the story sure sounds good, those I killed might have gone on to actually help people live a more normal life. People that otherwise wouldn’t have. They aren’t shadow kin because they’re like shadows, they are kin to us, because they know us by living lives beside us over and over. How can I ever atone for the lives I’ve taken, even these from another world? And here I was, thinking I was noble, thinking to myself ‘you did good killing those shadow kin.’ What a joke. Am I just a joke? A murderer? Am I the monster?*

“So what do we do?” asked Don, pulling the other two away from the remnant.

“Do we believe it?”

“We can’t kill it anyway,” Elita reminded them. “And should we really attack something that’s just sitting there?”

“That wouldn’t be right,” agreed Everest. “That story though, tugging the heartstrings a little *too* much, wouldn’t you say? Oh, I’m so altruistic, look at me.”

“Lad? You have any thoughts?”

“Hm? I don’t know, it seems everything I do turns out wrong. We have some time, Elita I want that ‘ghost’ spell of your put on me. Drop it at a count of thirty or something. No, make it sixty after I go inside.”

“Inside?”

“That.” He pointed at the war machine. “These remnants may be telling the truth, or they may not. Either way I won’t make it easy for them.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Same thing I did before, destroy the main power source. Let them power it by magic if they can. At least then a dead magic area would stop it. Meanwhile you discuss what to do with our ‘friend’ here. I don’t think I can trust myself.”

“But if everything you do turns out wrong, isn’t taking the power supply wrong?” Everest asked. Don smacked him in the back of the head. “What? I’m just asking.”

Lysanias chuckled. “Figure out a course of action and then do the opposite? Is that what you’re saying? No, this I’m sure is correct. No one should have access to such a thing. Even if I believe the remnants would use it responsibly, it could be captured and then used irresponsibly. I won’t have that on my conscience too.”

“Sounds good lad. We’ll debate while you’re gone.”

“Great. See you all in a bit.”

As Lysanias walked towards the war machine and ghosted through the walls, only one thought was on his mind. *After this, we’re coming for you, shadow king. You seem to be the center of all this, let’s see what’s so great about you.*

Lysanias picked a clear area and waited for Elita to drop the spell, looking around in the light provided by his sword hilt. *I think I have to go that way, if I'm not mistaken.*

"Hello? Tiny person? You're just standing there? Hello? Are my speakers broken, I didn't think they were broken. Lalalalalala, yup, waveform registers to my microphones."

"What? Hello?" Lysanias gave a start as he came back to being in phase with the world around him and heard a voice echoing in the hallway.

"So you can hear me! I was starting to wonder. You wandered in here through the wall like a ghost, then just stood there. Thought you might have broken down."

"No, I was waiting for the magic- never mind. I can hear you. Where are you?" He peered down both ends of the passageway.

"Silly. You're inside me right now. How does that feel?"

Lysanias was vaguely embarrassed, but wasn't sure exactly why. "You're the remnant war machine?"

"I prefer to be called an 'incentivized peace engine' but as it pleases you."

"Ah. Nice to meet you?"

"You don't sound very sure of that."

"I didn't expect you to be, um, awake?"

"Close enough. I would have used the term 'active' or 'online' though that term is fairly archaic at this point. I must say though, your Esperanto is perfect. Usually only remnants speak it so well, have you been around them long?"

"My what?"

"I think your kind calls it 'Ancient' or something. You know, the language you're speaking? The one all the governments of the world started teaching as a second language instead of allowing students to choose one of the dozens of others in school? This way after a while everyone would have a common language at last? All before the fall, of course, what a great time that was."

"Oh, that." *Come to think of it, why would my ability to communicate extend to machines? Strange.* "That's a long story." *Ancient. Ha! If only they knew. My native language is far older.*

"Pity. So, can I offer you a tour, or what?"

*Great, what do I tell this thing?* "It's sort of awkward, actually."

"You want my autograph? That is awkward, my handwriting is terrible. You ever try to hold a pen with a giant electrified whip thing? I mean when they designed me would a manipulator *hand* have been too much to ask? Maybe if you held up a piece of stone I could fire my laser at it, carve my name out. A large piece of stone, anyway. Oh, and to clarify by 'hold up' I mean 'stand far away from.'"

"Could one of your weapons even do that? Carve stone?"

"Maybe, if I used the smaller one at minimal power. Wait, I was joking about the autograph thing, that really isn't what you want, it is?"

Lysanias gave a weak laugh. "No, that's not actually it." *Why did they give a giant war machine a sense of humor? Is blowing stuff up funny to it? As it rolled over some poor guy would it think 'did you see that guy? I totally crushed his head and it went splat all over the place, so hilarious!*

"So then what do you want?"

*Great, if it decides to squish my friends out there there's not going to be anything I can do about. But if I lie, it might know, the other remnants implied as much after my 'interrogation.'* "I want to take your power supply away." He braced himself for the lurching of the machine that signified his friends being turned into paste.

"My power supply? I need that, why do you want it?"

"I know of no other way to disable you."

"Why do you want to disable me? What did I ever do to you?"

"It's not what you've done, it's what you could do. You're too dangerous. Look at you, you're the size of a building. A dragon could hardly slow one of your kind down. I don't deny the remnants here might have the best intentions, but I've done things with the best of intentions and later found out they were the wrong things to do. If one decided to replace your brain with theirs and go on a rampage, whole cities could be destroyed before you were stopped."

"That's undoubtedly true," it admitted, sounding pleased. "Given your current level of technology. Though this 'magic' stuff intrigues me, I'm hoping one day to be fitted with the system that will let me do it."

*Was it listening to us earlier? And now I see there's a bit of a flaw in that plan too. If letting a remnant run on magic allows them to use magic like we do, what would letting this run on magic get us? A giant war machine that can do magic. Wait a second...* "So you don't mind me taking your power supply then!"

"I never said that. Did I say that? I don't think I said that."

"Not in so many words. Look, follow me on this one, all right? Your power supply goes missing. Now you're useless to the remnants here who have put a lot of work into you. They have two choices, well, three I suppose. Try and find you another power supply that will work. Forget the whole thing, not likely at this stage. Their only other option then is to accelerate your being powered by magic." *Of course to balance the ability to do spells you become far more vulnerable because to shut you down all someone has to do is a spell to deny magic in the area you're in. You go dark and they can tear you apart as they see fit. Without magic, perhaps, but it could be done. A person could just walk out of the area but you would be powered by magic. You wouldn't be able to go anywhere. So I guess it's a decent trade off.*

"Hey, that's actually reasonable. That's odd, did not see that coming. You actually argued your case, and got me to agree, at least in principal. I suppose I wouldn't be totally offline with it gone. I can run off my batteries for some time. Long enough for some solar panels to be set up above ground and the power brought down to me to recharge them. They would be pretty angry though, when they learned you used this time to walk in and steal it."

*And you know what I need? Another group of people swearing revenge on me. I just got rid of the last group I didn't need another! Can't really be helped, I guess?* "What if you told them you generously donated it to... our... cause?"

The sound of electronic laughter filled the hall. "That's a good one. What could you possibly need my power supply for?"

"Blowing something up?"

"It would do that, make no mistake. Along with you, and everything nearby."

"Believe me, I've seen one of you self-destruct. The aftermath, I mean."

"Have you? I suppose that explains your utter lack of morals, sneaking in here to steal what makes me work because I might one day do something awful. But please, go right ahead and rip my still beating heart out not because of something I *have* done, but because of what someone else might make me do at some point in the future."

That brought Lysanias up short. "So you aren't okay with it?"

"Oh my, someone cranked my sarcasm dial up to eleven, who could have done such a thing? All back down to zero now, so sorry to have confused you. Of course I'm perfectly all right with being crippled down here on the off chance they'll get the magic system installed in me and working correctly. Wait, it's gone up again, why does that keep happening?"

"Look, if you think you can keep yourself from being used for evil, I'm fine with just leaving things as they are here."

"If you can prove you don't want my heart to blow up a city that offended you or hold the world hostage, I'm fine with you taking it. And that one day I will get the upgraded system so I wouldn't need it anymore."

"I can't prove any of that!"

"Then we seem to be at an impasse."

"I could just walk over there and take it."

"As I could open fire with the lasers I'm charging at that little band of people outside. How many shots do you think?"

"I didn't say I was going to!"

"Neither did I."

Lysanias scowled. *This isn't working. Should I just leave it alone for now? Wait a second-* "I could ask!"

"Ask? Who? What are you talking about?"

"The universe. I can get answers to questions with ten minutes of concentration. I'll just ask if it's safe to leave you as you are."

"You can ask the universe? Do you mean Mr. Universe? That competition hasn't been held in thousands of years."

"No, I mean the literal universe. It's a seer ability, it's difficult to explain."

"I suppose it must be. Whatever you think is best, I guess?"

*Great, I just need one yes or no question that encompasses all of time and space to know if this war machine will be used by unscrupulous people for evil. Given that hardly anyone sees themselves as unscrupulous or evil. Any use would be justified, in the minds of whoever used it. Maybe a different way of going about it...*

*How many beings will this war machine destroy if I leave the power supply intact?*

There was no answer.

*Great. How about this; will I come to regret leaving the war machine power supply intact?*

Again, there was no answer.

*You have got to be kidding me. I don't have much time left. I hated to cheat and put magic on, it could become a crutch but I don't think I have much choice. I have to figure this out before the remnants come back.* "Let my skill be augmented!" he cast, sparkling magic swirling around him. *And of course it wipes me out... But what question to ask now? Maybe I'm asking something too far reaching? I'll limit my question to the near future, then! In the next three hundred years will the war machine act or be used in a way I would consider immoral if I leave the power supply?*

No.

*Whew! Finally.* "Okay, I'll leave it, but you have to promise me something."

"Let's hear it before I agree."

"You have to do everything in your power to avoid being used improperly. That means killing anybody. Guard this remnant town, don't let humans destroy them, that's fine. But don't go looking for fights. And if someone tries to replace you, make you act another way, destroy yourself before you let that happen."

"I would have done that anyway, you didn't need to say it."

"I had to say it, and I want you to say you agree."

"Then I agree."

Lysanias let out a deep breath. *Amy, I've never missed you more than in this moment. If this thing is lying...* "Very well. You may keep your 'beating heart.'"

"Quite the change of heart yourself. You really can ask- no, don't tell me, I don't want to know."

"Very well. It was nice talking to you."

"And you. I haven't gotten to talk to many humans lately. None, actually. Come visit again some time."

"I'll try. For now I better go. See you later."

"See you. Do you know your way out?"

"Ah, I was just going to teleport, but if you don't mind telling me the way?"

"Not at all. Turn to your right and go to the second intersection..."

"Lysanias!" everyone exclaimed as he came out of the war machine.

"Are you all right?" Elita asked, being nearest.

"I'm fine. It didn't go as planned but everything worked out in the end."

"And that war machine?" Don asked, pointing.

"They're not going to cause trouble. I got their word on it. And I asked."

"Hope you know what you're doing," Everest told him.

"I do. Now, what did you all decide? You've had plenty of time."

"I decided on ribs," Don announced. "Beautifully glazed, fall off the bone tenderness, and forget vegetables. That leaves room for more ribs! And dessert. And mead."

"I think he means the shadow kin?" Everest sighed.

"We decided that even if we could kill it—"

"Which I doubt," interrupted the remnant.

"Destroying one shadow kin isn't going to do much when our next target is the boss anyway. We'll tell them we managed to finish it off, and when it gets a chance it'll just leave."

"What about the memory loss?" Lysanias asked.

The remnant waved that off. "I've been recording anything pertinent. I'll leave Speaker-wire a message explaining the situation and they can get caught up on what they missed while I was around."

*How thoughtful. And something interesting remnants can do. Or is this just another lie? Really wish Amy was around, she could have told us. And that's the second time I've thought of her today. Really have to let her go. He glanced over at Elita. She's supposedly a light in the darkness we're going to face, and her magic can attack and heal at the same time. But she's not Amy. And not only because she wears clothes all the time. Shoot, isn't there truth telling magic? The courts use that candle but I but there must be other, less obvious truth magic. I could just have her do a spell like that, she would probably use it all the time! Huh. Very flexible magic but if you don't think of something you might as well not have it. Skyebourne magic relies entirely on the imagination of the person using it. What an odd thing.* "Okay. I guess it's a day of trust."

"Thank you," Speaker-wire said, getting up. "If you really can protect this world I will spread the word to my brethren. We will do our best to become invisible again."

"Very well."

The group now stood around awkwardly until the time was up, but one other thing seemed to be bothering Elita.

"Could you have possessed the war machine directly?" she asked. "Or can you only possess human like beings?"

"Not very effectively, at least at first," they answered, looking over at it. "We know how to operate arms and legs. Treads? Not so much. Besides, where would I have gone had I done so? This one is stuck here until a passageway to the surface large enough to accommodate is constructed. An elevator would not be able to lift the bulk, it would have to roll through a tunnel with an incline. We're at a loss how it got buried

down here, the earth must have simply swallowed it up during the upheaval caused by the arrival of the chaos moon.”

“That would be tricky.”

*It could be shrunk down with magic though, or made to fly. I don't think the size of the thing is really the limiting factor here.*

“Indeed.”

With the time elapsed the group heard a strange sound, and above them dropped a small form held up by four spinning blades at the corners. “Everything all right here?” a voice issued from the drone.

“Everything's fine,” Don yelled up to it. “You can let everyone back in, the danger has passed.”

*Please let the danger have passed... Please let the danger have passed.*

The drone whizzed upwards again and a moment or two later remnants started filling the area again, getting back to work. The remnant that had accompanied them down stepped back up to them.

“Speaker-wire?” it asked.

“I should go and be checked out before returning to my duties,” they replied. “I've been filled in on what's going on.”

“Very well. Get that taken care of and return to your assigned tasks.”

“Of course. If you will all excuse me?” They marched into the elevator and the doors closed. *Whew.*

“It seems we owe you our thanks,” the remnant allowed. “That could have been much worse.”

“So you'll not have us killed, then?” Everest asked.

“As long as you agree never to tell anyone about our project here, you are free to go.”

“Thank you,” Don told him. “Can you lead us back to the outside? I'm sure you don't want us stumbling around up there, and the way will have to be clear so we're not seen emerging from the hidden section.”

“Very astute. Come with me, please.” Once the elevator was back the group piled into it and was led out to the city again. “Here you are.” The remnant then turned and the wall closed up, obscuring them without a further farewell.

“That was odd,” Elita admitted. “But hey, Lysanias, you aren't unconscious! Well done.”

“Or in jail!” Don praised.

“Very funny, both of you.”

“Let's find a place to stay and plan our next move,” Don suggested. “It's too late to start anything today.”

“It's barely noon,” Everest suggested, looking up at the sun.

“And we've been through a lot. Our plan is to start some kind of assault on a skybourne city, right? How are we going to get up to one? What are we going to do when we get there? How can we prepare beforehand? We shouldn't just rush up there.”

“Good luck getting to one,” Elita offered. “They destroy airships that get too close, and you can't teleport to them. I admit I've been curious how you think you're going to do all this. That balloon of yours will get ripped to shreds.”

“That much is covered,” Lysanias assured her. “We're not taking the balloon. As for the rest, we can prepare as best we can and then hope that's enough.”

“How is getting up there covered?”

“Tell us over lunch,” Don suggested. “All that meat talk you guys were going on about made me hungry.”

“Who was going on about it?” Everest asked, smacking him in the arm.

So the group sat down to eat and after the food was brought out and Don was digging in, Elita prompted Lysanias to share his plan.

"We'll basically stay on the ground," he explained. "My mountain spirit has gotten fairly large in the past, but there seems to be no actual limit to how large it can be. Apart from the energy loss changing size demands, I mean."

"Great, another ride in the hands of the spirit I can't see," Everest grumped.

"You can always hop into a ward until we arrive," Don suggested with a grin.

He made a face. "I don't know which would be worse, honestly. But the plan is basically to just have your spirit lift us up where we belong?"

"Where the eagles fly," he agreed.

"We'll be mountain high," Elita mused. "Air gets pretty thin once you leave a city, I should know. Your spirit will have to cover us with its hands to keep the air in. Once we arrive we should be fine though, the city itself seems to thicken the air. Probably magic, because we all like breathing a lot."

"What then?" Everest asked.

"Depends on what city we actually reach, and the situation there. Outsiders aren't going to be welcome but nobody has any weapons. The best those fatties will be able to do is look sternly at you and demand you leave."

"And you're sure they won't use magic against us?" Don asked around a rib.

"Completely. Also, gross! Wipe your beard! Unless they've learned how, as I did, in the past year or so. Given how immediate my access to magic was once I left, it has to be something about the cities themselves that cause it. I don't think we have anything to worry about as far as that goes."

"I hope you're right," Lysanias nearly prayed. "I don't want to find myself once again trying to defend myself from people that should be helping me to help them."

"Bah. With our new magic it'll be fine," Don assured them.

"It's fine enough for you," Everest told him, stroking his spell lens. "Magic takes a lot out of me. I need to save my strength for the final confrontation. The 'bunny fight' if you will."

"Same here," Elita reminded them.

"I've got enough armor and ignore wards made, I'll focus on spirit battery ones for the rest of the day. Find some ley lines and stretch myself as far as I can. Hopefully that will help."

"Are you really sure that's going to be enough?" Elita protested. "No offence, but you get beaten up a lot, Lysanias. And I'm not exactly a fighter. I've never really been in a situation like this. Are hordes of undead really going to attack us? What if the knockout spell doesn't even work on them?"

"Then we get out of there and plan something else," he replied. "Look, none of us really has any idea what we'll find up there. But working together we've made it through this far. We stick together, cover each other, and stick to our roles. I had that dream for a reason, we got to prepare ahead of time and learned what I think the dream wanted us to learn. I have to believe I got woken up in this time for a reason. That reason is quickly approaching. I wouldn't have dreamed of you if you weren't exactly what we needed up there. You can show us around, you know how to talk to skybourne people, and can come up with spells if we get into a tight spot."

"That I'll never be able to forget, I remind you."

"So become an undead hunter when this is over," Don suggested. "You'll have the experience, and they do exist. People pay good money for that sort of thing."

"You really think we can do this?"

"Lass," he replied, gripping her shoulder. "We stick together and keep our heads, we're going to come out of this without a scratch."

*Keeping our heads, did you have to put it like that?* Lysanias imagined a zombie creature tearing his brains out and eating them, then gave a shudder. *Great, now I've lost my appetite.*

“You gonna finish that, lad?”

## Beginning The Assault

When: The next morning

Where: An empty field kilometers from anything interesting

True to his word, Lysanias had prepared the group well for their confrontation with the “shadow king” in his lair above the clouds. The afternoon before he had purchased several “gun belts” that had pouches and places for shotgun shells. He, however, had a different idea in mind for them. That morning he had distributed the small vials of alchemical creations he had been lugging around all that time, ready to grab and throw at a moment’s notice. These were loaded up into the belts, the larger vials going into the pouches while the smaller ones simply slid into the space where the shells would go. With that done he activated two armor wards apiece for each person, and made sure everyone was well armed.

Everest and he both had a stock of arrow-spears, some tipped with iron, some with angelic metal. Lysanias’ had the grooves in them for additional damage potential with animation, while Everest’s were simply razor points on the end. Everest also had his normal daggers, one iron and one light, mirrored by Elita. All three had split his stock of spirit battery wards, though Elita promised to use them only as a last resort. She planned to steal the energy of any fallen skyebourne which hopefully Don’s spell of knockout would produce in great numbers. As for his shield, it was uncovered and showing the dark surface that would suck in anything that touched it.

Lysanias wished he could afford to get energy in the same way, but given his relatively low skill in manipulating magic like a skyebourne he felt he would have to spend just as much energy to succeed on the spell as he was likely to get from it. So he hoped simply blocking and throwing people into his personal dimension would be enough. *I’ll put my spell of augmentation on once we’re up there though. That will last the whole time and the benefit will outweigh the magical drag I’ll be under. Plus it will hopefully save me energy as I won’t need to put as much effort into blocking. The magic will take care of that for me.*

The balloon, having taken them this far was put away into a ward as usual, and Lysanias gave them a chance to think over their preparations and make sure nothing had been missed. When no one spoke up each person took a sip of Aqua Vitae so they wouldn’t need to eat or drink the rest of the day, and were now looking up at the rapidly approaching skyebourne city. They had made for the nearest one, finding it while riding in the balloon and scanning the skies with the glass. Lysanias’ spirit was out, weapons were held tightly in hand, and all but Elita wore grim expressions of resolve.

“We’re really going to do this?” she asked nervously. “Go up there and look for the shadow king?”

“That’s right,” answered Lysanias. “Hopefully there’s some method for steering the islands or at least teleporting between them. We’ll ask around where the most likely place is the shadow king could be hiding out and then go there. They must be connected somehow, once you’re inside them. I mean without being able to move from one city to another eventually everyone would be too related to have kids with. I know, we heard from the shadow kin remnant the person we want to see is in the largest city, and it’s not that I don’t trust what they said. But finding that one will probably be easier once we’re there, and we can ask what the situation is up there at the same time.”

She nervously laughed, eyes darting about as though she were already in mortal danger. “Just ask around. As easy as that, huh?”

“If not then I’ll just ask which city we should go to, and figure the rest out from there.”

“Right, sure.”

“You with us, lass?”

“Yeah, it’s just, you know how long I worked to escape from one of these cities? Now I get to go back there... it’s just not something I ever thought I would do. And furthermore going back to *fight* my own kind? Or at least one of them.”

“One of them taken over by something the shadow kin decided to follow,” Lysanias reminded her.

“Stick close, we’ll be fine,” Everest assured her.

“Everyone ready? It’s coming this way,” Lysanias announced.

“Let’s do this!” Don exclaimed.

The mountain spirit began to grow, and the group hopped into its hands when it was big enough to hold them all. It made a dome around them, cutting off all the light but keeping the air in for the most part. *So does Everest just see the surrounding landscape despite it being totally dark in here? That’s weird.*

“We’re coming up on it, it’s working,” he announced, looking upwards. “My goodness this city is large. Okay, get ready to jump off!” The group felt the impact as the island hit the spirit, the plan being for it to hang on as best it could while they got off, then shrink down to a more manageable size while holding onto something. That way it too would be lifted off the ground. The spirit opened its hands, and Lysanias saw pavement stones under him so he jumped, followed by the others. He was the only one to miss the landing and tumble, having to throw his arm to the side so he didn’t slice himself on the shield or vanish into his personal dimension.

“You okay?” Elita asked as he sat up, trying not to giggle at the absurdity of his tumble.

“Guess I’m not as used to this larger body as I thought.”

“Because you still see yourself as a fifteen year old. Right. What’s that?”

Lysanias scrambled up and looked in the direction she was pointing. Out from behind several houses nearby overweight people holding strange staves were advancing on them.

“I think they noticed your spirit,” Everest figured, but none seemed to be looking at it. They simply advanced on the group, staves parallel to the ground and faces almost expressionless. All wore fine robes, and all were about three times the size of Lysanias in girth, if not height. The staves they carried seemed to have a hook on them, but were otherwise unadorned, plain metal.

“What are those?” Everest asked.

“Never seen them before,” Elita answered, clearly at a loss. *This is supposed to be her home territory, and she’s already seeing things she can’t identify? Great, just great.*

“We mean you no harm,” he yelled to them, but still set his shield in front of himself. “We just want to talk.”

But it seemed the figures didn’t want to talk, and all six of them, three men and three women, did something to their staves and a red light shot out of them, streaking towards the group. All dodged, but one bolt apiece caught Everest and Lysanias, making their ghostly armor visible for a second and straining the wards creating it. But both held, making Lysanias breathe a sigh of relief.

“I think those staves are weapons,” Everest pointed out.

“No, you think?” Don retorted.

“Go for their weapons, they should be helpless,” Elita suggested.

*No, you think? I guess we should have come up with the unseen wards on as well. I wanted to ask around, but it would have been easier to take them off once we knew what the situation was. This just let our enemy once again strike at the time of their choosing, which is getting really old.*

“I’ll handle our defense, you disarm them,” Everest said as the overweight figures closed on them. “Deflection!” he cast as one got another quick shot off. It smashed

through it completely, hitting him in the body. The armor ward took it again, but it started to look frayed at the edges.

"Maybe I should handle our defense?" Don asked.

"Just disarm them!" Everest shot back.

Lysanias glanced over at his spirit, still far too huge to be of any help here, and wondered what he could do while they closed. *Wait a second, would this work?*

"Deflection!" he cast, targeting the one directly in front of him. The air hardened in front of the man and he ran headlong into it, bouncing him back. *It did. At least it distracted him a second.*

Meanwhile the one nearer to Don attacked him, but Don shouted "Deflection" himself and the bolt bounced away.

"That's how it's done, hope you were taking notes."

"Yeah, yeah."

The last two seemed to realize they had *long range* weapons and skidded to a halt themselves, dropping to one knee to steady their polearms, which were not really the greatest shape to make something that beams shot out. *The hook just unbalances it, doesn't it? If you want a staff that shoots a beam, okay, but why the hook? I could even see a sword, maybe, shooting a beam out where you pointed the blade. A short one, anyway, maybe a bit longer than a dagger? Maybe as long as you were undamaged? But no, why would anyone build that kind of weakness into an enchanted sword?*

"Deflection!" both Elita and Everest shouted, blocking two more bolts coming at the party. Both got blocked.

"We can't just keep blocking them!" she shouted.

"I hear you, lass."

Don charged forward, swinging his halberd back and down to try and break the pole the skybourne woman in front of him was aiming for another blast. This forced her to move it aside, spoiling her aim, but Don clearly was vexed this hadn't smashed it out of her hands.

The skybourne woman in the back shot at Lysanias, who raised his shield to try and block it, but didn't manage it. The bolt bounced off his armor ward, which also started to look frayed. *I am terrible at this! I should have put the augmenting spell on while we were on the way up.*

Elita started casting a spell, taking the full time to shape the magic properly. Don cast a spell as well, "Create fire!" he called, targeting the one nearest him. The flame only flickered into existence for a second but it was enough. Her robe caught fire and she threw her polearm down, trying to smother the flames with a cry.

*Nice one. Now that's using spells effectively.*

The one that Lysanias had staggered shook off the impact and dropped to one knee as well, about to fire.

*Ugh, this isn't working. Mountain spirit, it's taking you too long to shrink back down to size. Why are you never around when... never mind. I'm dismissing you and I want you right back, right there, got it?* The spirit vanished, and Lysanias waited for it to return, knowing it would now be at its original size. *Hello? You have got to be kidding me. You know what? Forget it. I don't know why I even bother.* Lysanias yelped and tried to block another bolt that came shooting at him, which resulted in total failure and slammed into his body, making both armor wards burn away. *I really don't understand why I bother. I really don't.*

Meanwhile, magical energy was starting to build up around the opposing group, and Elita finished her spell with a flourish. "All your weapons are mine!" she shouted, and the weapons in their hands melted away, tumbling to the ground before her.

"Seriously," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "I have to do everything around here."

“Now maybe we can talk?” Lysanias suggested to the group, taking a step forward and lowering his shield.

The lead skyebourne looked back and to the sides, and the others nodded to him. “No,” he said simply, and was covered with shadow. The others followed suit, the flames burning the robes of the one vanishing as the darkness crept up each person to engulf them.

“Come on, all six of you?” he wailed, as the lead one raised its arms and started forward again.

“Lysanias!” called Elita, grabbing the dagger from its holster and tossing it forward. *I get you!* He caught the handle with his ability to move rock, given that’s what it was, and stabbed it into the leg of the skyebourne. He tried to dodge but this Lysanias had practiced quite a bit, and managed to get the leg. The shadow cried out and was forced out of the body of the man, so Lysanias drew his sword and stepped forward.

Don now started casting, taking the full time for his spell so he didn’t mess it up. Everest at the same time flung his dagger using his own skill at commanding rock, and it too met its mark. “What do we do about the others?” he asked. “Anyone want a cookie?”

The three shadow kin behind the main ones raised their hands and created balls of darkness, having no ranged weapons now. *Oh great, they’ll attack with that in a second.* Lysanias easily pierced the one he was in front of with his sword, then began shaping the energies for the banishing ritual.

Don finished casting, shouting out “Elemental Ring, Knockout!” and putting the initial ring just beyond his friends. The energy expanded, at least driving all but one of them back and making them loose the energy they had been gathering for the beams. The two now partially attached shadow kin were stuck where they were, the spell having passed harmlessly over them. Lysanias wasn’t sure if the skyebourne were hurt, but it least it had bought them some time. The one that hadn’t been knocked back was the one closest to Don, who now tried to leap upon him. Don whirled his halberd around and knocked the shadow kin away from himself.

Most of the shadow kin now at the edge of the spell simply stepped through it, and started towards them again. *Oh great, why does this banishing stuff take so long?*

“In the name of the emperor, I command you to begone from this world!” The shadow kin vanished, and the skyebourne it used to be connected to jerked as though waking up. *Maybe he’ll be more apt to talk now?*

The man had a sort of blank stare now, but looked down at the knife stuck in his leg. He pulled it out and raised it like he was going to attack with it.

*Or not? What in the world?*

The one shadow kin who did not step through the wall of magic that was supposed to be holding them back reached over and pulled the knife out of the one skyebourne, making the shadow kin snap back into her.

*You really have to be kidding me.*

The shadow kin next to Don was trying to get nearer to him, but he simply kept the butt of his weapon between them, and it couldn’t reach.

The now free shadow kin walked through the shimmering energy, and Don dropped it, seeing that it wasn’t doing the group any good at this point. This let Everest see clearly the knife held in the hand of the skyebourne supposedly without a shadow kin attached. So he willed it out of that hand and sailing into the leg of the shadow kin fighting Don. This one cried out and left the body, both standing as if statues. Lysanias wasted no time, plunging the sword into its chest and beginning the ritual banishment a second time. As the shadow kin renewed gathering dark energy for their beam attack, Lysanias finally finished intoning the ritual phrase causing a second shadow kin to be removed from the combat.

The skyebourne stood there stupidly.

With the shadow kin now on them again Everest summoned the other blade, which he stuck into the leg of the one before him.

The skyebourne now in front of Don seemed to ignore the blade stuck in her leg, simply trying to punch him in the face. He let the armor ward take it, not even bothering to dodge, but looked mystified as to what was going on.

"What are you doing?" he asked her. "We're saving you, snap out of it!"

Lysanias spun back to Everest, leaving Don to ponder this skyebourne that was still bent on attacking him, and once again plunged his sword into a shadow kin. A third time he began the banishing ritual, somewhat distressed as to how close the remaining three dark figures were. As he started the banishing something odd happened. The other three didn't attack, they lowered their arms watched as he completed the ritual and the third shadow kin was dispatched. They seemed to share a glance and nodded again. All took a step back and held up their arms, each ball of darkness winking out as they did so.

"We're leaving, we don't want to be banished. Nor do we want to survive at the expense of other worlds. Please, destroy the king if you can." The shadows detached and the normal form of the skyebourne returned as they zipped away from the group.

"Now can we please talk?" Lysanias said, looking the skyebourne over. "You must realize something odd is going on. Hello?" Blank stares met his, and the skyebourne took another step forward. "What are you doing?"

"You don't think..." Don suggested.

"Think what?" he insisted, stepping back.

"That they're zombies?" Everest finished, getting both knives back. "Yes, I do!"

"Lad, your shield!" Don was still fending off the one before him, simply poking it with the butt of his halberd as it tried to reach him.

Lysanias was the only one without ward protection at this point, so the others, Don and Everest at least, held the zombies back as they now mindlessly pressed the attack. Luckily they seemed to not be very good at attacking, and one by one tumbled into the personal dimension portal. Each seemed to fight as though the others weren't there, and none seemed to realize the shield was the thing making their fellows vanish. They just kept coming, one at a time, to swing at him. When they were all gone Lysanias sat down on the grass, breathing heavily. *Thank you, past me, for having this shield idea. My arm feels like lead though. And I think the air is thinner up here, despite the magics keeping enough around for us to breathe at this height.*

"Guess that was a bit of a preview of what is to come," Don said, joining him.

"Nice job getting their weapons away from them, by the way."

"Not a problem," Elita replied with a smile. She was looking one of them over. "So do you think you squeeze it or-" A red bolt shot out, impacting the ground further on. She yelped and dropped it.

"Watch where you point that thing!"

"Sorry! I guess you do just squeeze it. But look at the shape of this thing." She stepped over it, gesturing at the top part. "I mean it's got a hook on the end of it."

"I was thinking the same thing," Lysanias agreed. "I would have made something like this much smaller, maybe just a length of metal that would fit in the hand."

"More like a gun?" asked Everest, also picking one up.

"I don't know, you grip that to compensate for the lead ball that comes shooting out, right? I would make it more like a stick."

"I think that would have been called a wand, back in the day," Everest told him.

"Back in the day?" Elita snorted, amused. "I told you about the game we played with wands a little while ago. We still have them up here."

"So you did."

"Well," Don said as if that was that, "whatever you would have done, or what it was called, these belong to us now. Let's put them someplace where they won't be found."

"I'm keeping one," Elita announced. "I'll put it into my pocket dimension. You can have the rest."

"We should be able to find some rope someplace," Lysanias suggested. "If we tie them into a bundle I can put them into a contain ward."

"Why not just shove them through the shield?" asked Everest.

"Because there's six skybourne in there now. When this is over I don't want to face them again with these weapons! That I so helpfully returned to them!"

"Good point!"

"Wait a second!" Lysanias told Elita as she started to cast her spell to put the rod away. "Hand me that a second, would you?" She shrugged and handed it over, and Lysanias quietly poured a trickle of power into it. A moment of concentration later and he had his answer.

"Yeah, it's just plain old metal all right. So this should work fine." Holding it up he willed it to reshape, shrinking and pulling the hook into the main body. When he was done he had a slender wand made of metal, which happened to weigh as much as the original rod did. But at least it was easier to carry around and aim. He pointed it at the ground away from them and squeezed. He was rewarded with a red bolt kicking up dirt some meters away, and nodded in satisfaction.

"Nice!" said Elita.

"Noice!" agreed Don.

"Neice!" further agreed Everest, because humor comes in threes.

Lysanias shook his head and took the wand in his other hand, carefully handing it back to Elita. "You'll put your eye out," he cautioned as she took it.

She laughed. "Thanks for the warning. And for the wand, knew we kept you around for a reason." She too aimed it away from them and squeezed, and another red bolt came shooting out. "Now we're talking." She looked it over, considering and swishing it through the air. "I'll still put it away, I guess. I don't know how good I'd be at aiming the blast, and I would not want to hit one of you in the back by accident."

"You're all heart," Don told her as she magically opened a hole in the air and shoved it through.

"If you two are through playing around," Everest began, "perhaps we could talk about those people we fought? What was up with them? Not that I don't already know, of course, but I would like your thoughts."

"The shadow king turned a bunch of people into zombies," Elita reasoned, "then had them possessed by shadow kin. It's actually fairly brilliant, probably why the knockout spell didn't do much. Maybe it hit the shadow kin, or maybe they just didn't feel it because they were animating a zombie? Who knows."

"So the dream was right, we are going to face more of them," Lysanias groaned.

"Look on the bright side," Don suggested with a whack to the back. "The shield did wonders, and if you had the spirit out and some augmentation magic, I bet the spirit could throw them into the shield and make them vanish. You wouldn't even need to move it very much."

"Where did that go?" Elita asked, looking around. "I saw it, then it vanished."

"Don't ask me," he grumbled. "I told it I was letting it go, then I wanted it right back out to help. That would have instantly shrank it. But did it come back? Noooo."

"So hard to find good help these days," she sympathized.

"You got that right." He hauled himself up with a groan. He put two more armor wards on, and gave another two to Everest, who pulled his mostly destroyed ones off and stuck the new ones in their place. He looked around, the city's buildings weren't that far, but the city seemed devoid of people. *Of course, if zombies were running around my town, I would make myself scarce too. Knocking on a few doors should show the situation around here.* "Come on, let's see if there are still some normal people around or if it's a total zombie jamboree."

Lysanias was starting to feel sick to his stomach. Walking through the clearly deserted streets and peering into abandoned homes was giving him a sinking feeling that had nothing to do with the altitude. *This place has clearly been abandoned.* Doors stood open as though the people that lived there had simply walked away. There was no sign of struggle, nothing knocked over or broken. Some places had half eaten meals, some looked like they had gotten out of bed and were about to return. But the silence of the streets greeted them, and nothing more. Lysanias thought he might have seen a cat or two in the distance, but otherwise the city was lifeless apart from them.

*Why doesn't that food disappear? Different spell, or haven't they been gone a whole day yet? I can't see these people preparing their own food, and I'm pretty sure Elita said they made food with magic same as we do.*

"I don't understand it," Elita was saying. "Every single person can't have disappeared. It's against skyebourne law to leave the city anyway, not that anyone would want to. Where could they have all gone?"

"I'm afraid to guess," Don replied, looking a bit haunted himself. "More importantly, do you feel that?"

Lysanias had been looking for signs of life energy, desperately hoping perhaps the people that lived here had all gathered in one place to protect themselves from shadow kin possessed, energy bolt wielding zombies. *But what if those that were left were just a guard? What if there are no people left to hide, because now they're all zombies?* He now switched over to trying to sense magic, and winced. "I do now. What is that?"

"Half a dozen spells, by the feel of it," he replied. "Go ahead, you can't miss it Elita."

She nodded, almost seeming to be squinting against a bright light. "I feel it. Them. That's a lot of spells."

"Come on." Don led them down a street and then turned, almost seeming to sniff the air. "There." He pointed, and the group looked over to see... Nothing.

"What are we looking at?" Everest asked.

Don started banging the paving stones with his halberd, listening to how they sounded. "It should be here. Ah, this one!" It sounded hollow and together the group worked the stone up out of the ground. They tossed it aside, not having to worry someone would stumble, and looked down into the hole that was left. It was hard to tell without more light but there seemed to be some coin looking disks inside the depression. "Here you are. What's going on with you then?" he asked, reaching into the hole to grab them. He passed them around to the group and looked one over himself. They were simply flat, metal disks with no engraving or markings, but Lysanias could feel magic coming off of them.

"Anti-scrying maybe?" Don asked, passing the one he was looking at over. "Ah, and this one is clearly anti-teleportation," he said of the one he was handed.

"I don't know about this one," Elita admitted. "Some kind of mental spell, that's for sure."

"And this one is some kind of magic suppresser," Lysanias guessed.

"This one is anti-communication magic, mental, dreams, anything like that," Don went on, looking at another.

"Some kind of alarm spell?" Elita figured, looking at her second one.

"What does it mean?" Everest asked, somewhat frustrated he couldn't feel magic like the others could.

"Someone went through a lot of trouble. Here." He handed them over to Everest

and commanded they stay there a moment. He stood on tiptoes and then gazed around, heading off down the street. The others stood examining the “coins” when Don’s voice reached them again. “Hey, over here! I was right.” He waved them over and found him levering up another stone, which had an identical set of metal disks under it. The group found two more sets, then gave up. “All the same spells,” Lysanias observed. “Fairly regularly spaced.” They had put the coins into a pouch for easier carrying, and they jingled inside as he walked.

“They would have to be,” Don told them. “After all, magic can only reach so far and there’s a lot of ground to cover if you want to protect this whole floating city.”

“But that’s nuts,” Everest protested. “There would have to be dozens of these caches just to protect one swath of city from end to end. You would then need that same number again some distance away, like planting corn. Row and rows of them! And look at how many disks there are in each one. Do you know what kind of work that took?”

“I can imagine how it was done though,” Elita said sadly. “Come on, there must be one around here someplace.” She led them through the streets looking for something, and the group passed more elaborate houses, fountains, and parks until she nodded and went into a certain building. “School, thought so.” Walking the halls the rooms were small, probably didn’t have to hold many kids at once, and she checked shelves until she found what she was looking for. “History book,” she explained, opening it up. Showing them the pictures, she translated what the pages read. “According to our history, some war was going on and a woman named Skye Bourne was going around slaughtering dragons to get their wishstones. Steel dragons, apparently, have some kind of magical repository in their bodies that can be removed and will grant a wish. She wished she had the magic to end the war. Well, she got it, and she did. That was the beginning of us, the skyebourne people. Don’t ask me how one woman with slightly more convenient magic won a whole war, I have no idea.”

*Wait, slaughtering dragons, plural? What, was one “wishstone” not enough for this woman? What did she use the others on? What could she possibly want after getting skyebourne magic that her magic couldn’t just do for her? Did she want an out in case the wish went wrong, like “I wish I hadn’t wished that last wish?”*

“Probably she didn’t,” Everest informed her. “But history was recorded that she did to put your people on top.”

“And on top is right. Her ancestors built the cities to live in, and basically ruled from on high until they, I don’t know, got bored? Maybe they think they still do, at some level. I know I heard enough bad mouthing those that lived on ‘soil’ while I was living up here. The average person wouldn’t care about the governing of the surface, so maybe only the surface knows they aren’t under skyebourne rule anymore. Anyway, here it says ‘and the people of soil did happily labor for their betters, the skyebourne, helping them to secure their cities that they might be safe havens of paradise for all time.’ Guess what that really means?”

“Slave labor,” Lysanias replied with a scowl. “And maybe worse, given the amount of magic we have here.” He bounced the pouch of disks in his hand. “They may have been drained of energy so that the augmentation spell could be done to whoever was making the disks.”

“Still, it takes more than just dizzying skill,” Everest protested. “Each one of those would need ingredients. That wouldn’t have been cheap.”

“Who said the skyebourne paid?” Elita countered. “The skyebourne are raised believing they are almost superior beings. Akin to angels, almost, not that we really revere them or anything. Nobody questions it. And that’s a thousand years later—imagine how bad it was in the beginning. Remember, magic in those days had just caused a massive war. Skye ended it, maybe the people were grateful. Maybe they were happy to grovel a bit and help with the cities, knowing it would get rid of the people they were groveling to.”

The others shared a look. “They ruled with an iron fist, I’m guessing,” Don finally

said.

“More than likely.”

“But you didn’t believe the propaganda,” Everest realized. “You wanted to get out of here. You saw people disappearing and tried to warn everyone. They didn’t listen.”

“And now we know why. My immunity to magic, or at least my inability to be so directly influenced by it. We’ve never actually seen how far that ‘immunity’ goes. Probably should have, before I throw myself in front of a fireball or something.” She gazed off into the distance, considering.

“One of these spells, maybe the mental one, could it be some kind of pacifier?” Lysanias asked. “Keeping people content up here and not questioning the laws? I mean, making it illegal to leave? We know why that’s in place too, if people left they would start figuring out their magic again.”

“What I don’t get is why bother?” Don asked. “If this hadn’t been done, well you were saying it before. Everyone might be a skybourne by- oh.”

“Exactly,” Elita agreed. “Then everyone would be equal again. That would never do. Not to those original people who didn’t have to study magic to do spells. Remember, at the time there was no guild. You think you have it bad with them? It was everyone for themselves I expect. Magic may have been feared and even despised, given it was the major cause for the war.”

*Wait, is she saying the mage’s guild actually has a point? That they’re really doing all they do for the benefit of the world? I can’t imagine- but then, it was set up a long time ago. Who knows how it’s changed since then?*

The group shook their heads. “Unbelievable,” Everest muttered. “By the way, what other interesting books might I find around here? Can you grab some, I’d love to look through them later.”

“You and your books,” Don said, not unkindly.

“What?”

“No, I agree with you on this one. Looking through their version of history, seeing what stories they’ve written up here after being isolated for so long. It could be quite interesting.”

“That’s better.”

“I can grab some.” The group wandered through the school, grabbing things that caught their interest, and Lysanias put them into a box they found and stored them.

“No rope though,” he complained. “I don’t want to be carrying these things around all day.” He shook the poles at the group. *Nor do I just want to set them down. I proved I could shrink them down into a more useful form, and I think having some magical, ranged weapons might come in handy even after this is all over.*

“Sorry, forgot about that!” Elita apologized. “Here, come with me.” She walked to an alcove in the wall and stood before it. “Three pieces of medium thickness rope, length, oh, forty centimeters?” The alcove flashed and there were three pieces of rope sitting there.

Don nearly fell over.

“What in the world?” he exclaimed, grabbing the rope up and pulling it taut in his hands. “This is real rope!”

“Of course it’s real. Why would I make him imaginary rope?”

“I think he means... No, that’s exactly what he meant,” Everest allowed. “Was this brought from a storeroom or something?”

“No, the alcove makes it. It wasn’t just teleported here, that’s why I had to be so specific about the length. Why?”

“That’s impossible,” Don nearly shouted, still looking the rope over. “Clearly impossible.”

“Then how did I just do it? It’s not that big a deal, these are all over the place.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. What?”

“It’s impossible,” he repeated. “It didn’t just happen.”

“I’m missing something,” Lysanias spoke up.

“It has to do with how magic works, it’s a fundamental rule of magic,” Don insisted. “There’s three types of spells, all right? Instant spells, that create something and then it’s there. Like our water spell, or the fire making spell. Small quantities of an element. Then there’s maintained spells, like my new ring spell. I want it to continue, it continues. Up to a point, right?”

“Right. That’s why I didn’t put the augmenting spell on. If I had done it on the ground it would have gone away when I got up here. I would have had to put it on all over again.”

“Exactly. The magic wants a specific task. Then there’s so called “permanent spells,” like creation. Just pulling simple objects out of thin air. You don’t have to maintain them, but there’s a reason that spell isn’t used more often.”

“Okay?”

“The reason is that when the caster dies, all their “permanent” spells go away. Say you made a bridge out of 10% magically created material. The wizard that made that metal dies. Your bridge falls apart. That’s how it works. How it always has, far as I’ve understood magical theory.”

“I’ve only read that’s been the case,” Everest agreed.

“Ah, so you’re wondering what’s maintaining this rope,” Lysanias guessed.

“Unless there’s a tiny person behind here that’s using the creation magic, it should just appear and then vanish again into nothing.”

“Exactly. Is it this alcove? Is *it* somehow keeping this rope here? If I smash it, will the rope go away? Will everything this alcove made go away? That could be anything around here, so I can’t believe that’s the case because of the danger. But still...”

“What about that food spell?” asked Elita. “That doesn’t follow your three rules.”

“The food we make does disappear though,” Don reminded her. “It’s instant in one sense, but with a limited duration. I don’t know what keeps your food around, I did notice some still on tables in the city. Maybe it’s more like this alcove, so I really should have realized it before but I had more important things to be thinking about than leftovers. I guess there are exceptions, but always does the magically created ‘stuff’ go away if it’s more complex than water. This is not water!” He shook the rope at her.

“So they found a spell that doesn’t work that way? Imbued it into the alcove to dispense things? Or maybe our magic really does work differently on a more basic level. Maybe what our magic creates *is* permanent.”

He shook his head. “It’s still magic, it can’t have completely separate rules. I can’t drop a rock, walk two miles, drop another and have it drop slower. If that was the case don’t you think *we* would have discovered the principal after so long? You’ve seen how people go crazy for Lysanias’ metal. Mines are running out all over the place. This alcove, it could change everything!”

*Or maybe the guild has discovered actual “permanent” spells, but knew better than to release them to the public for fear nobody would work anymore, and eventually things would fall apart again. So we just know about the semi-permanent ones, which would be in character for them.*

“If we could figure out how it worked,” clarified Everest.

“You think the brightest minds of the age wouldn’t dedicate their lives to it? It could save us from one day having to go back to using bone tools!”

*True. If they were going to, it would have to be soon. Everywhere we went people said the same thing. Mines are running out all over.*

“We can’t exactly bring it with us,” Everest told him.

“I realize that. I’m just, ugh, what other surprises do these floating islands have for us?”

“Let’s just head to the control room,” suggested Elita. “I think they’re down under the city, so there should be an entrance somewhere. We need to find the other cities, see if they’re like this one.”

“Alcoves. Ha!” Don handed the rope to Lysanias, who sloppily tied the remaining polearms together and put them away.

“Lead the way.”

“Just keep your eyes open, I don’t know where it might be exactly.”

The group kept a sharp lookout and finally discovered a booth containing some stairs down into the bowels of the island. Single file they descended into darkness, finally coming to a dirty control room that showed “windows” to the outside. There was a “control panel” of sorts with clearly labeled buttons, though the labels were quite faded after all this time. With some difficulty the group managed to project a map of the land, and many glowing dots were shown on it, one brighter than the rest.

“That must be where we are,” Everest figured. “That’s the position of every other city.”

*How did they do that, if the cities can’t be scryed upon? Maybe an exception can be made, like how I make my wards not make us ignore one another.*

“We’ll have to try steering this island over to one,” Elita mused, scowling at the controls. “I see no way to teleport from here to another, or how to make one come to us.”

“I wouldn’t teleport anyway,” Lysanias assured her. “If you weren’t going in the same direction you would die.”

“Not if there was a doorway you could step through, like these windows,” she countered, pointing upwards.

“True. That might compensate. Look for something to control the flight of this place.”

They finally found it, taking it off “automagic” flight and controlling it directly, then headed for the nearest city.

“Looks like K’Reel,” Elita told them. “This one is K’Raal, if you wondered. See, the labels are here.”

*I didn’t.*

“Isn’t K’Reel the place you come from?” Don asked.

“Why yes, I guess it is!”

“And you’ve chosen it, what, at random? Checking on your family has nothing to do with your choice?”

“It’s closest by a fair margin, look!”

“You don’t have to convince me, lass. If you want to check in on your folks, it’s fine with us.”

Elita looked at each member of their little group, all who had no problem with this.

“Thanks,” she muttered, looking down.

The group maneuvered the city into the path of K’Reel and hoped it would be “smart” enough to avoid a collision. It was, coming to a smooth stop before smashing into the thing now in the way. *Good thing it isn’t “smart” enough to just go around, looks like it’ll just hang here in the sky until it gets further orders.* Everest, having taken the controls, moved the city until they felt a clear bump, then headed back to the surface. They were able to simply walk across to K’Reel, the islands now being that close together. There they found the same situation as K’Raal. An empty city, buried coins that maintained the protection spells, and majestic looking but cold and lifeless houses.

Elita wasted no time in guiding them to her home, which was as cold and empty as all the others. “Dad, mom?” she forlornly called, standing in the entryway of her home. There was no answer.

“We’ll figure this mystery out,” Lysanias promised her. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

"Do you want a moment?" Don asked, being more sensitive.

"No, it's okay," she sniffed, rubbing her nose. "Standing here won't do me any good. You're right, we'll find them."

"Could they have left a note, in case you came back and they weren't here?" Everest asked.

"I think that would be harder," she decided, turning away. "Knowing they did or didn't. If they didn't, maybe they didn't care about my leaving, in the end. But if they did I might... I might..."

"Easy lass. Once this situation is resolved you'll have plenty of time to look. And you'll see, they'll be overjoyed to see you again. Especially because you'll be the one that saved them all."

"I guess. Come on, whatever we're going to do, let's do it."

Taking that island they repeated the procedure for N'Thrael and A'Raal city, leaving each one motionless in the sky as they went to the next one. With a handful of the coins removed from one edge they figured someone could teleport up to them if they needed to, but it was now late afternoon and Lysanias was getting increasingly worried.

"We can't keep on like this," he protested, when they were looking for the next one to get to. "The shadow kin told us where to go, seeing what I've seen here I'm inclined to believe it. What's the biggest city? Let's quit stalling and go there!."

Elita sighed. "I had hoped to find *someone* up here, but I guess there's no help for it. It's the capital. Ferronaria, home of the Emperor." She pointed to a blip on the screen that was marked as such. "That's probably where we need to go."

"Then let's go!"

"I think these islands can move pretty fast, we'll get there in no time."

The group watched the ground whiz by, wondering if anyone was looking up at the city so obviously in a rush to get someplace. Most cities just sort of floated, as though wafted on the breeze, as they had no real destination. This city clearly did. He also wondered what people would think of the ones just hanging there. *I hope we don't start any kind of a panic down there.*

"Tell me," Don said as they waited to arrive. "How many people are we missing here, roughly?"

"Maybe a thousand per city?" Elita guessed. "They aren't all the same size, of course."

"And there's how many cities?"

"More than twelve."

"That's a lot of people. If they've all been turned into zombies--"

"Don't even joke about that!"

"I'm not. I'm just saying they must be someplace. Could they be packed into the capital? Are we going to be waist deep in them?"

"More like chin deep in your case," Everest reminded him.

"Yes, this is really the time for jokes," he replied crossly.

"I don't know," admitted Elita. "I am worried, there's no question about that. The fact *everybody* is gone, that's... It's almost too much to accept. Where are my people? Older people? Kids? Whatever took them didn't leave *anybody*?"

"I could ask," Lysanias brightened. "We've got some time yet."

"Could you? I'd be grateful."

"Of course! You're better at magic, can you put the augmentation spell on me? I might get a clearer answer if I'm better at it."

"Not a problem. Let your skill be augmented!" she cast, magic swirling.

"Thanks." *This isn't going to be a yes or no questions, but maybe I can get a few words? Amy also said an image or two was possible, and my skill should rival hers at the moment. Let's see what it can really do. Universe, I ask this of you: What are the*

*people that should be here in these cities doing currently?*

Lysanias did not get any words, but he did get a picture. A flash of insight that so surprised him he fell over backwards, unable to accept it could be real.

“What is it lad, what did you see?” Don asked.

“We have to hurry, can this go faster?” Lysanias sprang up and frantically looked over the control panel.

“What did you see?” Don demanded.

“Cities under attack by undead,” Lysanias told him, face pale. “Skyebourne zombies with those hook weapons everywhere. Skeletons with swords, fire and chaos in the streets. While we’ve been exploring up here, people down on the surface are dying.”

The silent urgings of Lysanias for the island they were flying in to go faster did nothing to spur it to greater efforts, and the group arrived in exactly the same amount of time they would have had he done nothing. *Which, to be fair, I did. But now what?* The capital, far larger than the puny floating bit of rock they were currently inside came up quickly on their viewscreen. *It looks like someone just cut the top off a mountain, made it float, and flipped it upside down to build the city on. The others looked more like they were pulled from the ground, and that ball of dirt was held together by magic. This? This looks completely different.* From below large chunks of what looked like ruby protruded, Lysanias could only guess at their purpose. *Possibly some kind of stabilizer for so great an amount of stone lifted into the air? I have no idea how airships work, but I think someone mentioned they use crystals of some kind to help focus the magic.* From the ground sprouted buildings, trees, parks, all at a greater scale than the cities they had quickly toured. But in the center was the grandest tower of them all, pure white and gleaming, higher than any surrounding structure. *That's our target.*

"How are we getting off? Same way as before?" Elita asked.

Lysanias shook his head. "I'm sure the shadow king would *love* to introduce us to whatever zombie troops he or she has stationed around the capital. But that's not for us. We're going straight in. I'll get my spirit out, it can hang off the edge as it grows. When it's big enough to touch the ground below we'll simply ride down in a hand."

"Then let's see if we can maneuver this island into a good spot," Everest announced, working the controls.

"I could get used to flying around on an island instead of a balloon," Don told them. "You get to see the world, and no matter where you go, you're already home. It's quite a bit faster too."

*Not fast enough for me. You didn't see those people being torn up. I did.*

"Say, I wonder if one of these islands could be used to explore the world beyond the ocean," Everest mused. "Ships don't make it back, but this isn't a ship. And full of skyebourne people that could use magic? And we know they shoot down airships, so they must have some sort of weapon system we could figure out. What could really take it down? Would be an interesting experiment."

"I'll remind you to put it on your bucket list," Don assured him. "Come on, stop fooling around and get us into position already."

"This isn't easy, you know?" Everest said back.

*Neither is listening to your excuses!* he wisely didn't say aloud.

Moments later the group pounded back up the stairs, Lysanias calling to his spirit to come and help them again. He had to call three times before it heard him, appearing on the stairs and running to catch up with them.

*I still don't get how you have trouble hearing me, you're a part of my soul. It doesn't even make sense. It's not like you're far away. I suppose I should be thankful it doesn't take you ten minutes to arrive though. Considering most everything else I do does, it seems that's easily how it could have worked.*

But he had more important things to worry about, and soon the spirit was carrying them to the edge as it was faster. It grew and grew, then simply jumped off the one island down to the other, landing with a crash. Trees and smaller greenery were blown away in the impact, and Lysanias was pretty sure the entire place shook, at least a little.

*They know we're here. Like they didn't already, but still.*

"I thought you said we would be gently lowered!" Everest chided him, head clearly swimming. He was closing his eyes, holding on to the spirit's hand for dear life.

"Well, the spirit had other ideas. I wanted to get down and I'm in a hurry. This added up to it jumping. I don't control every movement of it, how could I?" They were set down and the spirit turned to the tower it was now standing next to, and towering over. It almost seemed to consider for a second and then shrug, hauling off and trying to smash the thing down with a double fist. There was an intense crash as the spirit's hands bounced off magical energy surrounding the tower, and it seemed almost disgusted that hadn't worked. With a sound like an avalanche it started getting smaller again.

"Good try though," Elita praised. "It could have worked."

"Stay alert. Oh, and let my ability to block be augmented!" Magical energy swirled around Lysanias as he sacrificed his internal energies to power the magic. *Let's hope that's worth it.*

The group expected some sort of troops but either there were none to be had or they were guarding further out. The place was empty, and the spirit had time to shrink down to a more useful size again. The group went up more stairs, heading directly for the tower before them. Lysanias noted the fine lawns and statues only in passing, concentrating on trying to feel around him with his senses and not trip on the stairs at the same time. He didn't feel anything, but neither did he relax his guard. At the top of the steps there was a door baring their way, which was smooth as it had no handles. So the spirit, wondering if it might be more useful this time, braced itself and pushed it open. The door opened smoothly, without a sound, as if welcoming them inside. Light spilled out, so at least the group wouldn't have to fight in the dark, it seemed the interior shone as much as the exterior surface. The group tensed, ready to fight off zombies shooting bolts of red energy at them and dive to the sides should they see any flashes.

Instead, there stood the "funny little beastkin girl."

"You?" Don managed, looking about as surprised as a face hidden mostly behind a thick beard could look. Lysanias wasn't sure exactly what he had expected to see, but he thought that perhaps a dancing bear or grinning cat would have garnered less of a reaction in his friend than this small child looking beastkin. He looked her over, and she was as he had described. Short, looking quite young, with long, shimmering red hair, fox ears and tail. She was dressed in a strange robe that was belted with a wide belt, and he noticed she was staring at him as though she had never expected to see him again. "How can you-" Don then strained to get out, but she raised a hand.

"Peace, good dwarf. I am simply here to lead you to the inner chamber. I cannot interfere, this fight must be yours alone. Come, every moment we wait here is another death to one below. We have both, I think, resorted to trickery this time. But he does hold his end of the bargain, so I must as well. But I will not have you stumbling through this place adding to those deaths unnecessarily. Come." She turned and walked further into the palace, and the other two looked over at Don and Everest.

"We better get after her," he said with a shake of his head. "I knew she was more than she seemed," he muttered.

The group hurried on, past rooms full of fine hangings, chandeliers, polished tables. The girl led them unerringly towards the throne room, which she bade them enter while she stepped back.

"I'll want some answers, lass," Don said to her.

"You will get them, if you triumph as I believe you can."

"Ha! I'm a dwarf, aren't I?" He gripped his halberd and stepped into the room, side by side with his friends. It was basically a long hallway ending in a raised platform where sat a man raptly watching several views of the cities below being attacked by

undead. Many places were beginning to rally, with what looked like one man actually *biting* a skyebourne and seeming to grow more powerful.

“Ah, you’ve finally arrived,” said the man, waving his view away. All of the “windows” hanging in the air evaporated, and he rested back in his seat as though he didn’t have a care in the world. “Would have sworn that was going to be your chosen one, Inari, given my plan to use undead. But no, you chose him?” He pointed at Lysanias. “Wild.”

Lysanias looked back at her, and again that look of recognition crossed her face, but she quickly looked down. He noted doors to either side of the room, but didn’t feel any spiritual energy beyond them. *But would I? Undead have some semblance of life, shouldn’t I be able to feel that energy somehow? I have to believe the area beyond is crawling with zombies, given there are none here now. Didn’t have much chance, while fighting them, to really check out their spiritual essence. Probably should have though, it might have given us a clue what sort of force we’re about to deal with here.*

“It seems to have worked out,” she retorted.

The man laughed, and Lysanias turned his attention back. “That it did. Hiding him from me like that? So naughty. But you are a trickster, aren’t you? Given his stasis, I probably could have taken him over with no trouble, instead of waiting for my current avatar to become available.” He gestured at himself. “Ah well.”

“Can we get on with this?” Elita demanded. “My people are down there slaughtering others as undead! Or getting killed themselves!”

“Patience my subject. I’m sure they’ll be fine.” Lysanias looked the man over. He had golden hair, and wore a king’s robes in deep blue. Nearby stood a fine sword, balanced on the point without support next to the throne he was sitting in. He looked to be almost fifty, but he could be hundreds of years old or even thousands, given Lysanias himself was. Somehow he got the feeling this man was a bit more experienced than he was, given the lack of concern in his bearing.

“I’m no subject of yours.”

“Oh, but you are. You are a skyebourne, are you not? And I am the emperor of the skyebourne, Merrett V’Relni, at your service.” He gave a mocking bow of the head, as he hadn’t bothered to stand up yet.

“You overthrew the empress, like forty years ago,” she recalled. “But what are you doing this for? Why turn your own people into zombies?”

“Ah, but they aren’t *my* people, not anymore. It’s an interesting story, and I insist on telling it.”

*Of course you do, every minute we waste is more people dying down there. But do I make a move? Whip an arrow-spear at him and hope for the best? The entire tower withstood a blow from my spirit, I have to believe he’s protected as well. I’m too far away to tell what magic he has on him though.*

“So I’m not your subject then?”

“I suppose not, but that’s irrelevant. You know some history, that’s good. It’s true, in 2074 the man Merrett overthrew the empress to stop a skyebourne invasion of the surface world. You weren’t even born then, were you?”

*Wait, I thought he was Merrett? Is he talking in third person now or something?*

He continued, drumming his fingers on the arms of the throne. “But then something happened. He learned about the magic binding skyebourne to these islands. He learned the real history, that the skyebourne people had imprisoned themselves, becoming both jailers and inmates. In essence, your ancestors made you a prison in the sky, and then they made you like it. Not all of you, of course. Merrett and you are the most dramatic of exceptions. For different reasons, but there you are.”

“But you’re Merrett, you just said so!”

“I was. While Merrett was busy reading about the secret history of the skyebourne, I was finding the perfect host to begin my invasion of your world. That’s

when Inari came to me and offered me a wager.” He pointed to the beastkin girl, and she nodded.

*Wait, none of this makes any sense. I think I’m missing a lot of this story.*

“She said that we would play a bit of a game where this world was concerned. In exchange for not bringing in any outside help, I would allow her chosen champion at least the chance to face me directly. Did you ever wonder why I didn’t just explode you all from here? I could have, you know. What prevented me was not my good nature, or being sporting towards you, it was my wager with her. Had I killed her chosen champion it would have freed her to bring in help from outside the world, help that has proven adept at stopping me before. So I figured it was a good bet, I knew what everyone around here could do, and worked out my invasion plan. Little did I know she had hidden you away, Lysanias.”

“What? Who are you people? What are you talking about?” Lysanias demanded.

“Never mind that for now. I looked down upon this world and choose my avatar. It had to be someone powerful, of course, and who better than a skybourne? Oh, I could have chosen one of the dwindling supply of your kind, Lysanias, but conditions were not right with them. No, when Merrett compromised his morals and went from wanting to free his people to allowing them continued bondage I was able to take him over.”

“So you are the shadow king?” he reasoned. “You invaded the world of the wanderers, turned the shadow kin against them in a bid to save their lives. And just like them you act through possession?”

“Correct on all counts. Merrett was gone, I now had control of him. The game had begun.”

“Is this all just a game to you? Why do this?”

The man considered. “I suppose that was a bit flippant, wasn’t it? While this world did hang on a wager I made, my actions are no game, Lysanias. You seek to understand me, that’s smart. Know thy enemy, am I right? No, the reason I do it is simple. You ‘lesser’ beings have one major advantage over me, something I can’t even imagine. You can improve yourselves.” He paused like this was a major revelation.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you can learn. Grow. Become more than you were the day before. I do not have that ability. When I came into existence I was all that I would ever be. Would you be satisfied with that condition?”

“I suppose not.”

“Exactly. All I seek to do, Lysanias, is to be more like you. To grow, to change, to become more than I currently am. It’s just unfortunate the only way I can see to make that change is by taking the potential of others. But my true form is so far above yours I must take entire realities to even have a chance. But all that potential is bound up in those that already live there. Hence they must be destroyed if I am to absorb that power and one day evolve myself. Why do I do it? So that we may all become more.”

“That’s like saying the chicken I had yesterday became ‘more’ because I ate it,” Don countered.

“Well, the analogy is not exact, I admit. But the principal remains. I do not do this because I am bored, or because I dislike your kind of life. Quite the contrary, I enjoy watching you, struggling in your limited ways through the problems of your lives. Even coming here as I must, reducing myself to a fraction of what I am normally, is not distasteful to me. It provides a unique challenge- why do you think I took Inari’s wager? To make it more interesting. Become a part of me, Lysanias, know that your limited existence goes to furthering one far greater than yours will ever be.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The chicken doesn’t want to be eaten, I quite understand. Tell me, does knowing make it easier or harder for you?”

“I don’t think it changes my opinion at all.”

“Really? I shall return to my story, then. I started creating an army to destroy life here, she set in motion the awakening of her champion. Of course this was all years ago, so I had to wait before you emerged, but I kept myself entertained. There was no rush, after all. Finally you did arrive on the scene, and I could try killing you physically rather than magically at a distance. Shadow kin as you call them were already here, so they were fair game to use. I set some at various locations around the world hoping one would take you out. But that didn’t work and here you are. Despite coming close to dying so many times. Are you sure you had nothing to do with him squeaking by so many times?”

“I honor my agreements,” Inari answered, somewhat coldly.

“Humm, I suppose you do, or you would be no better than me. No, you won through and so no outside interference was brought in, one who knew the score and what to look for. But according to the rules I *can* kill you, if I strike you directly. So thank you for coming all this way.”

“You’ll fight me directly? No zombies?”

The man laughed. “Don’t be absurd. I have more than zombies to fight you with. But yes, I should have clarified that, forgive my lapse. In this context, striking you means physically, not just casting a spell to kill you from a distance. Of course now that you’re here, all magic is fair game, the wager was you wouldn’t make it here, so I had to allow you that chance. I’ll do everything in my power to destroy you at this point. Now to another matter; I should introduce you to my full fighting force. To that end, Elita, isn’t there someone you’re forgetting?”

“Forgetting? What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve turned your back on your parents, that much is clear. I didn’t see you mourning them turning into zombies, or did I just miss that? Or are you still holding out hope they, in particular, somehow escaped me? But you aren’t that naive, are you? Anyway, my point is you have more relatives than that, and I have more magic than just the living death spell. For not having a lot of faith, you do preserve the bones of your ancestors fairly well in the tombs beneath your cities.”

“You didn’t?” Elita now looked horrified, the full impact of the “bunny dream” hitting her now as she realized it hadn’t been as metaphoric as she had hoped.

“I did. Show yourselves, my warriors!” The doors opened and the group crowded together, back to back. From the right side of the room poured zombies, but from the left were skeletal warriors, many holding weapons and shields. The zombies also carried swords but many also wore armor, a few that Lysanias recognized from their fights with the wanderers. *Yup, he took it back to give to them. Great.* “I give you the living, and the dead, of the skybourne nation!” All looked somehow eager to fight, despite some having no flesh on their bones. Lysanias knew he must look shocked, despite the dream warning him this was coming. The man laughed. “The living and the dead, reunited,” he managed. “What a happy day. But don’t worry, I did more than just this- I visited graveyards throughout the land, gathering those to fight today. My zombie troops have waited long, and you saw, they have not disappointed.” All while he was talking forces poured into the room, Lysanias estimated at least a dozen of each type of creature. But the king wasn’t done. “And I think you know this charming fellow?” From behind the throne floated the ghost that had plagued them across the land, and it was shouting about revenge again.

*You have got to be kidding me. I banished that!*

“Thinking you banished it?” the king asked mockingly. “I went and got him back. Good help being so hard to find, after all.”

“We’ve prepared for this,” Lysanias said up to him. “We can still win this day, despite the odds.”

“You just keep telling yourself that.” Finally he stood, throwing off his robes to reveal that he was wearing a gleaming armor under them. He held a hand out to the

sword and it flew into his hand. "Attack," he ordered, pointing the sword at the group. The zombies and skeletons surged forward.

As the undead had poured into the room and waited for the order to attack, Lysanias' mind was racing. *The most dangerous person in this room, apart from the shadow king himself, is that ghost. It can throw us around without even being near. If it won't come near I can't get it into the shield. I have to take it out, and I think it's time to put a little theory I've been mulling over into action. Elita, he sent into her brain, turn me into a ghost with your spell while I attack the king. I bet he can suppress magic just as easily as Everest can with his spell. This will be a distraction.*

The spirit acted first. It was on the side of the zombies because that's how the universe works, but it towered over everything in the room given the ceiling was so high. It was a simple enough matter to take a step to the left and kick out with a massive foot at the nearest skeleton. The skeleton nimbly dodged to the side and chattered its teeth like it was laughing.

*You've got to be kidding me. My spirit has to be far better at hand to hand fighting than a stupid skeleton. How did it manage to dodge?*

The shadow king laughed to see such sport. "Oh, do that again!" he insisted.

The spirit needed no urging and do so. Again, it missed. The shadow king laughed all the harder. "Is this the force you send against me, Inari? He can't even hit a skeleton. How have you people survived this long?"

*I nearly didn't, I bunch of times. Also, the power of friendship.*

Shuffling forward the nearest zombie had reached Don, and struck out with a sword. He dodged to the side, not wanting to risk a parry as the sword could have some secondary effect that might be bad news for him. "Lad, get over here!" he called. "Bunnies, remember?"

*Change of plans Don, have to get that ghost out of here before it has a chance to attack.* He whipped an arrow-spear at the shadow king, hoping Elita took that opportunity to put her spell on him.

"Become ghost!" she cast, as the shadow king raised a hand and magic sparkled around him.

"Movement," he cast, trying to catch the arrow-spear and use it himself. This proved an unwise choice, if he had simply tried to deflect it, rather than show off his power, the spear would wouldn't have smashed through it as did with the attempt at telekinesis. It sank into his arm, past his armor, and the shadow king looked down at it in shock. "Oh, I see. That's how it is."

*Ha-ha. That skill I've practiced a lot, thank you very much. Also I think it worked, I'm insubstantial now, like a wanderer. That should let me deal with this ghost directly, if this works how I think it does..*

Don saw another zombie coming towards him, and perhaps figuring the plan had gone to the demon world, it was time to start fighting like a dwarf. Smart. "Weapon Rebounding!" he cast, wishing he could throw energy into magic like the others did. The sword descended and he winced, hoping he hadn't just made a terrible mistake. Magic shimmered around him and he felt nothing, but a gash appeared on the zombie that had tried to strike. "Take that, ya- oh wait, we're not supposed to be killing you guys, are we? Crap. I'm sure a cut or two will be fine."

A zombie went for Lysanias, but he ignored it, letting the attack pass through his body.

A skeleton had made it to Don, but he just stood there, figuring he could kill all the skeletons he wanted. Again the magic flared and when it was gone, the skeleton had simply dropped into bones, never to move again.

"Doesn't that beat all?" he remarked.

Everest looked around for something to do, but his part in the plan was to deal with the shadow king, who was still staring at the stone arrow-spear lodged in his arm. He smiled a wicked smile and simply grabbed it with his own ability to move earth, driving it in further and giving it a twist so the grooves would do their work.

The shadow king gave a roar of pain as the grooves and shoving did their work, and the cracking of bone could almost be heard above it. "I'll kill you all!" he shouted, his arm now hanging limp.

The spirit figured it would try a different skeleton this time, going for another one that was nearby. It felt a burst of satisfaction as the bones went flying in a heap, and didn't rise. It almost turned back to Lysanias as if to say "See, I did it! I can hit something!" but it wasn't really a braggart so it concentrated on its next target.

Two more zombies took a swipe at Don, who again ignored them while possibly feeling bad for the skybourne trapped inside this zombie like state.

Lysanias ignored a skeleton attacking him, astonished at how chaotic the battle was, everything was happening at once. He didn't have time to react to hardly anything. The zombies and skeletons were starting to crowd in, getting in each others way as they weren't very bright. *At least the ghost hasn't done anything yet either.*

Zombies were now clustered around Don, who didn't seem concerned as his magic was protecting him, but at the same time couldn't get his spell off just yet. A skeleton took a swipe at Everest while another took a swipe at Elita, and both cast "Deflection!" Both attacks bounced off the hardened air.

The ghost finally decided to do something, flying towards Lysanias in a rage, saving him the trouble of teleporting up there, which is what he had planned to do when he next had the opportunity. He passed through the zombies uselessly trying to attack Lysanias and forgetting his special abilities for the moment simply tried to grab him, not realizing Lysanias himself was like a ghost at the moment. Lysanias, not knowing the ghost was concentrating on becoming solid to grab him relied on his armor ward and simply bashed the razor edge of his shield into the ghost's midsection. The ghost's arms passed through Lysanias but the shield hit, (his solidity could be selective) causing the ghost to double over in both pain and surprise. "Pain!" it cried, probably believing it would never feel something like pain again.

"I'm sorry," Lysanias told it. "If you could just give up your quest for revenge you could probably still enter the afterlife normally. Wouldn't that be better than endlessly chasing me, yelling about revenge? What's it gotten you, anyway?"

"Let my injuries regenerate," the shadow king cast, making his arm start healing and rejecting the arrow-spear that was lodged in it.

"Deflection," cast Elita, as the zombie in front of her attacked again. "How about a little knockout action?" she asked as it bounced off.

"How about you take care of those skeletons like you're supposed to be doing?" he retorted. "Everest is getting surrounded!"

"Fine!" Another zombie swiped at her from the side but she ignored it, trusting Lysanias' wards to protect her for the moment. "Let light strike down my foes!" The shadow king waved a hand and the magic splintered in a way Lysanias had never seen before, dissipating before any of the skeletons could be struck.

"Like that?" he asked with a smirk. "Tore that ability out of man named Elysian, another thorn in my side along with his daughter. My goodness I hate those two!"

Lysanias wasn't really paying that much attention, he was shoving the shield into the ghost. "In the name of the emperor, begone from this world!"

Elita was forced to cast her deflection spell again, as the third zombie before her took another swipe. It nearly broke through but her spell stopped it.

Everest's wards took a few hits as skeletons attacked him, waiting for either Don or Elita do to more magic. He was hoping to get in another solid hit on the shadow king and hoped if he could distract him, one of the two could do a spell without his interference.

The spirit missed again, but at least was keeping several skeletons off of Everest, due to its size.

The ghost looked at Lysanias, pouring power into his banishing ritual in hopes of taking care of the it. "It really was an accident, wasn't it?" he said sadly. He bowed his head, making Lysanias wonder *Is he accepting the banishment?*

Don started casting his knockout spell, taking a step back so he was at the center of his friends. As Everest heard and saw the magical energies he whipped an arrow-spear at the king, who chose the simple expediency of the deflection spell this time, bouncing it back with ease. But this meant the knockout spell got through, hitting everything in the room, even the shadow king himself. This had the fortunate side effect of smashing some of the skeletons to bones, while others were simply thrown back. No one had time to really ponder why, but as everything was now either ten meters away or smashed up against a wall pinned there by elemental energy, they had a bit of a breather.

"Very clever," the shadow king praised them. "You work well as a team."

Lysanias felt a small glow of pride. *We do, don't we?* He looked to his right, there was still one zombie flailing away trying to hit him, but he figured this one had simply been too close to them, so Don couldn't include it in the ring. *Never mind, once I take care of this ghost...*

But the shadow king gestured again, and the ring winked out, the magic clearly splintering and falling away like glass.

"How's he doing that, lad?"

"How should I know?" He looked around, and with the ring gone the zombies and skeletons that remained were quickly making their way back to the group. *The trouble with undead seems to be, they just keep coming.*

The spirit stepped in front of two and struck out at the one, finally managing to deliver a blow to the head that the skeleton shrugged off like it was nothing.

*Well, it's getting a little more accurate?*

A skeleton had already made it back to Everest who had glanced at his ward and decided to let it take the hit. Both were looking about ready to fall apart at this point, he figured they might take one more hit at most, and then he would have to start defending himself. Instead he acted with Don who was casting "Successful strike" on him, hurling an arrow-spear at the shadow king again. The shadow king couldn't block the strike or negate the magic at the same time, so simply chose to try and scramble out of the way. He managed it, the arrow-spear solidly smashing into the throne the king had leapt up out of.

"Worms!" he called.

"We're winning!" Everest taunted.

The banishing ritual finally took hold, and accepting his fate or not, the ghost vanished back into the demon world.

A skeleton now stepped up to Elita, who grimaced and allowed the blow to fall where it would. As it was swinging she grabbed its ribs area, and while she couldn't tell

it was shocked because of the bony face, it was. "Be struck down," she cast. Her spell flashed around the room, smashing one skeleton to pieces and hitting the shadow king, who was not expecting it, straight in the face. She then gave a squeak and hauled the skeleton into the zombie that was stepping up to attack her.

The spirit slugged a skeleton, managing to connect, but it skittered back without falling.

"They're getting closer again, Don, how about another round of that ring spell?" Elita pleaded as she was forced to dodge another zombie getting near her.

"Got my own problem, lass," he replied, letting a zombie attack confident it would bounce off his spell or the wards. It didn't, the sword it was using passed right through both and scratched him. "Hey, that's a cheating sword!"

The zombie next to Lysanias took another swing. *But at the same time, their mindless nature makes them perform the same actions over and over without understanding why they are not doing what they want.*

Magical energy started sparkling around the group, skybourne magic, and Everest looked over to see the shadow king casting something. He whipped an arrow-lance out, knowing it was probably something nasty. It smacked solidly into his chest, and his magic backlashed on him. A cloud of green gas appeared around him, causing him to start choking but no one could tell that because the cloud was too thick to see through.

"That worked," Everest announced.

"Any time Don," Elita reminded him, dodging another couple of swipes from nearby zombies.

"Drop the spell on me," Lysanias shouted to her, coming in front of her. "I'll start taking care of these guys."

"Finally," she breathed. "It's about time."

"Sorry!"

The spell went away, leaving Lysanias solid again, and he bashed the shield into the nearest zombie, not that it was smart enough to dodge him. It vanished into the personal dimension.

"So do you want the spell?" Don asked.

"Just lure them over to me!"

"Come on then, this way!" Don shouted at the zombies, taking a step behind Elita to try and draw them that way.

It worked, a zombie trying to shamble through the crowd instead turned and headed towards him, taking a swing at Lysanias who moved before him. That one vanished as well.

*I'm starting to love this shield!*

The skeleton and zombie pair that had smashed into each other were now up and sighted Lysanias standing there. Both went for him, the skeleton of course being faster. It swished the blade it was carrying around the shield and the ward absorbed it.

*How can skeletons be better at fighting than zombies? They don't even have eyes.*

Lysanias now went into a flurry of blocking, sucking up zombies as they came near. Two just like that, then another after it took a step.

Everest had been keeping an eye on the green cloud, making sure it didn't move or anything, and saw the shadow king stumble out of it, eyes watering and gasping for breath. So he sent another arrow-spear at him, just for good measure. The shadow king couldn't do a thing to defend himself, and disappeared back into the cloud driven by the force of the blow. Don stepped to the side of him, letting his damage reflection spell take

a hit and protect Everest. He then struck out with the halberd, probably figuring it should get some use in this melee. He smashed the skeleton apart, making bones fly.

"Sorry, honorable ancestor," he apologized to it.

By now the zombies were basically lining up to join their brethren in the personal dimension, it seemed none of them were really all that proficient with their swords. Whatever armor they had didn't matter in the least, when they were simply getting sucked up. With Lysanias able to handle that, the others turned to the skeletons and finally knocked them to pieces with a combination of Elita's spell and Don's strength of arms.

The battlefield became quiet, and the green cloud of gas dissipated, leaving the dying body of the shadow king lying there, two arrow-lances in his chest.

"How?" he croaked, and then croaked. The group stood around, looking down at his body, wondering if it was really over.

"We fought together, as a team," Don told the lifeless corpse. "You fought alone, your undead army simply a distraction, not something you could coordinate with and take full advantage of. Your defeat was inevitable. Also, I'm a dwarf, what did you think was going to happen? In your face!"

"Not really appropriate, Don," Everest chided.

*So is his death on my conscience? I helped kill him, I suppose, but Everest did his job of distraction and attack, plus that weird gas he created with magic seems to have done a job on him. That might have killed him in the end even without my- huh. I actually came up with the weapon that killed him, the arrow-lances. So yeah, I guess I am at least partly to blame. Hopefully that's the last death I have to participate in, ever. Right?* He glanced upwards.

"Well done," said the beastkin girl, who in all that had simply stood there, being ignored by everything. She walked over to the group, then kicked the body of the shadow king in the leg. She looked up at Lysanias. "But there is more work to do, now. No time for celebration, we have to get this island moving. I can show you where and how."

"We have to help the cities that are under attack," Lysanias agreed.

"Not exactly," she clarified. "The spell that the skybourne were put under has been broken with the death of Merrett. Those that were skeletons are no longer animated, simply bones in the dust. The people of flesh and blood are now simply terrified people who a moment ago were zombies." She shook her head. "I'm afraid many will die before the townspeople they attacked realize this," she told Elita. "By the time this day is over, you will be one of the last of your kind."

"My parents?" she asked, distraught.

"I don't know. The skybourne people were scattered to the four corners of the land. They could be anywhere at this point."

"We can find them," Lysanias promised her. "No matter what, we'll figure something out."

She took a deep breath. "I know."

"For now, let's get those you captured out of the personal dimension, and I think this one needs healing." She nudged a skybourne man with a toe, he had gone down at some point in the fighting. "He's still alive."

And so the cleanup began. While the capital city was flown to Fareborough by Everest, those that could detect magic disabled a portion of the protection network and all of them teleported down to the surface again. They did what they could to stop any

more skyebourne being killed, and a few survived. The bones of skeletons were everywhere, and a shocked populous was going to need some time to process all this, and clean up. It took hours, but all the skyebourne in the city were rounded up, (most were hiding, unaware how they even got there) and the mage's guild contacted branches in other cities to do the same. Many were unharmed, the skeletons being more numerous and dangerous, and so more often attacked. More would probably pull through now that they knew healing magic would work and the skyebourne would no longer mindlessly attack. The skyebourne that had survived here were, of course, being very uncooperative. They were herded into the waiting room of the guild to try and decide what to do with them. Mages were standing around, and Lysanias walked in on some kind of argument. The beastkin girl had told him there was one last task he needed to do, and apparently it was here.

"You need to do something!" the largest man Lysanias had ever seen was screaming at the mage's guild representatives. "We are skyebourne, we can't be here on soil!"

"I have no idea what this man is saying," said the representative. "I know it's somewhat against the rules, but does someone know a translation spell? I doubt he can pay, but..."

No one spoke up, the prohibition of using magic for free ingrained into them.

"You want to return to your city?" Lysanias asked him, walking over.

"I can understand you! Yes, we must return at once, do you have the means to do that?"

"What do you mean? Your city is right up there." He pointed up at the ceiling. "You must have seen it floating above Fareborough. Certainly a 'mighty skyebourne' such as yourself can simply wish himself home, correct?"

The man's face went red, and he started shaking with rage. "We once ruled the world. I shouldn't have to do my own magic, everything I demand should be given to me."

"Really? You want me to use magic to return you? The problem with that, you see, is that down here on 'soil' we have some pretty strict rules, especially where magic is concerned. If you want magic done, you have to pay for it. Isn't that right?"

"Totally correct!" the rep said, following only half of this, but somewhat relieved this obese man wasn't shouting at him anymore.

"So how much coin do you have on you?"

"Coin?"

He nodded in mock sympathy. "That's what I thought. Perhaps you could hire an airship to ferry you- wait, no, your cities destroy any craft that get too close, don't they?"

"Of course they- oh."

"Exactly. *You*, and the rest of your people that survived this, have a problem. You're going to have to actually work together with the people down here to try and get home. I suggest patience and an understanding attitude. Otherwise, you are simply a refugee. You will have to accept the charity of others to survive. You are ignorant of how this world works, and you have no place making demands. Your king is dead, your people scattered and reduced in number. You are in a very, *very*, bad situation, and I suggest you think long and hard about your next move." The man now became pale, he knew Lysanias was right. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to have a word with this man, and then he'll be right back to help you, all right?"

"Okay," he said woodenly.

Lysanias smiled. "You see? Not too hard, is it?" He gestured for the man to follow, and they went off a ways while the man sat, a shocked look on his face.

“Here’s a few things the guild will need to know,” Lysanias told the rep. “First, several skyebourne cities are now motionless, and can be teleported to. We disabled a small bit of the protections around them, so you’ll have to be creative, but you can scry and teleport to a small section of each one.” He counted a set of the metal disks they had picked up. “These are what keep the islands protected. They’re scattered regularly about the whole place, under rocks usually. Anyone with magic sense can find them.”

“I see.”

“Next, you can offer to get them home using this method, for a price. Ask for their ‘alcove’ magic. They have these alcoves in walls that can just create objects a person asks for.”

“That’s impossible!”

“So I’ve been told, and some choose to believe it. I know they’re wrong, wait and see. I’ve seen rope made with them using my own eyes. They figured out a way. You figure out how they did it, and if stuff made with those ‘alcoves’ sticks around, maybe our metal shortage is over. I know the guild will want to keep this to itself, but please try not to? The world and the skybourne need each other again. If you can’t figure the alcoves out, perhaps some kind of trade agreement? Most of them are dead, they’re going to need people to live up there so they can repopulate. Figure something out.”

“Oh, I think we can work *something* out.”

“Great! Keep in mind their cities suppress their magic, and may also influence their thinking on some level. We didn’t have time to study exactly what those disks did. Anyone that goes up there should be careful, you’ll have to decide if you dig them all up or not at the highest levels. Skyebourne magic is... different. No more dangerous or anything, and extremely hard to master, but it could be useful. Like I said, you need each other. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but there will be a time when mines run out, and without their help you’ll really be in trouble.”

“I understand. We’ll take it carefully, believe me. By the way, who are you, and how do you know all this? How could that man understand you? Did you actually see a city with your own eyes to know all this? If so how, if you disabled the protections?” He took in a breath to continue his stream of questions, but Lysanias held up a hand and laughed.

“I’m just a field agent of the alchemist branch who got lucky and figured some things out. As for the rest, well, that’s a story for another time. You’ve got work to do. Don’t let me keep you from it.” He pointed to the waiting skyebourne.

“I suppose so. Thanks.” He seemed torn between demanding answers and heading back, but heading back seemed to win and he turned to go.

“Of course.”

With a smile Lysanias walked out to his friends, and the beastkin girl that had insisted she wouldn’t go inside.

“That was the last piece,” she announced. “You did it, Lysanias. I knew you could.”

*I just hope this time I have done the right thing.* “Who are you?” he asked. “I have so many questions.”

“And Inari will be happy to answer them,” she replied with a smile. “As for me, come here and give your mother a hug.”

Lysanias stared down at her, arms open. Gears turned in his head, and he felt his eyes tearing up. “Mom?”

“It’s me, dear. It’s your mom. Come on, I don’t have much time!”

“Mom?” he repeated, falling to his knees before her. “You survived? How did you-”

But all questions were wiped away as the spirit of his mother embraced her child for the first and last time in thousands of years.

“My son, you did so good,” she managed, tears spilling from her eyes. “I’m so proud of you.”

And then she was gone.

## Epilog

Lysanias felt something shift inside his mother, a spiritual parting that shocked him.

“She’s gone, Lysanias,” Inari said. “Not that I don’t mind warm hugs, but you’re basically hugging a stranger now.”

“What?” He let go, looking at the beastkin girl again. She was different, somehow, in a way he couldn’t put his finger on. *Maybe something about the eyes?*

“Hi! Nice to meet you, I’m Inari,” she announced. “I know you have a ton of questions, so I’m just going to steal you away from your friends a moment and then you can decide your next move. You don’t mind if I borrow him, do you?” she asked his friends, standing there looking confused. “Not to worry, I’ll be right back with him, count to ten if you like. He’ll be back!”

“You need to help me find my parents, don’t forget,” Elita reminded him. “I’ll want their support when I go back home to have tons of babies. We need to keep skybourne magic in the world somehow, right?” She winked. “I have plenty to teach them about ‘soil’ and about magic. Thanks to you all!”

*And so another woman leaves me, right Amy? Isn’t the hero of the story supposed to get a kiss at the end from the pretty girl? But I guess I didn’t really rescue anyone, she fought by my side even though she was scared. I was scared. I’m going to die alone, aren’t I?*

“And you owe me a mountain of gold,” Don reminded him, bringing him back to the conversation.

He chuckled. “I haven’t forgotten either thing. I’ll be right back, I doubt she has any ill intent towards me.”

“Of course not!” Inari insisted. “We’re just going to talk, and then we’ll be back in a jiffy.” She held out her hand, and Lysanias stood up. “Take my hand for now.”

“Sure.” He did, and suddenly found himself in a what appeared to be a log cabin, somewhere in the woods. Trees and birds could be seen out the window, and a cool breeze blew in.

“Ah, that’s better,” she announced. “Once your mother left, it was hard to stay there without crushing the whole dimension. Have a seat, this is going to take a bit of explaining.”

“Where are we?”

“Bzzzz, wrong. Your first question is, ‘what do you mean ‘once my mother left?’”

“Okay, what do you mean by ‘once my mother left?’” He sat on the wooden bench and looked around the room. It was fairly open, with a large chalk circle on the floor. Marbles were scattered around the room, all of them colorful and seeming to have a weight to them he wouldn’t have expected from just glass.

“That’s better. I let the spirit of your mother possess me, just as that one progenitor spirit did with the elf you killed. Only I kept her from being nuts. No, no need to thank me. I figured I owed it to you, with all that I put you through.”

“So you’re the reason I was asleep for thousands of years instead of, like, two?”

“Correct! I knew you were smart, kid. You didn’t disappoint. See, most of the souls of your people just float around being insane. But some managed to hold on to sanity. Those had some larger purpose in mind, and your mother was one of those. I offered to be her host so she could see how you did once you got out, and kept you there until you were needed. Needed- to *save the world*.” She said this last dramatically, then giggled into her hands like she was six.

“Again and again.”

“As you say. Thing is, once these spirits accomplish their purpose they move on, just like everybody else. It’s a way of separating the good from the bad ones, I guess. In any case, you saved the world from the ‘shadow king’ as you call him, and set the

wheels in motion for the skybourne and the mage's guild to start working together. Knowing you were okay and could make it in the world triggered her departure. Sorry you didn't get longer, but maybe you can find her in Heaven one day? She really did love you, you know. She was proud too, you surviving that as you did."

"I almost didn't a few times."

"True, but that's what friends are for." She began pacing the room, carefully not stepping on any marbles. "And I come to you today to ask your help. I know I have no right to, it was me that made sure you awoke in this time and not yours. You do understand why I did it, right? It had to be you, and your friends, to do this."

"Which would never have happened, had I just gotten there the long way. Maybe the world before the chaos moon would have killed me. Maybe the arrival would have. Who can say?"

"Exactly. So I have an offer for you. It isn't one sided, what I'm asking, it's an opportunity for you. To learn, to grow, to maybe find out what you want out of life now. I'll tell you everything. About the shadow king and what it is, who I really am, the whole bit. In exchange I'll give you the opportunity to really put your ability to learn any skill to the test. You can learn things you've not even considered yet, and make lots of new friends in the process. Whenever you want you can go back to see your old friends, don't worry. Return to that life, set up a shop, whatever. They won't even realize you've left, because I can send you back there at the exact instant we left no matter how long you stay with me. You're immortal anyway, right? You've always wanted time to practice your skills, right?" She stuck out her hand again with a big smile. "Saving the world, it could become a habit. Opportunity is knocking, all you have to do is reach out and grab it. What do you say?"