

Another Stupid Spell

by Bill Ricardi

Book 1 of Another Stupid Trilogy

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Foreword

Special thanks to my friends and family for supporting me during the writing of this book.

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Thanks to Amazon for being a platform where independent writers can share their art with the world.

Finally, thanks to all of the literary agents who took the time to review my work. We had some laughs, we had some tears, but at the end of the day I respect anyone who reads for a living, so there's that.

Now, let's go on an adventure, shall we?

Chapter 1

Me smart orc.

Other orc need go around and bash. Other orc need dig and farm. Other orc carry stuff and things. Not me. Me smartest kind of orc: Me use magic!

Orc live by hill in swamp. Big hills one way, muck other way. Elf trees past muck, no go there. Man town past hills, no go there. No go up, no go down, big water those ways. Me swim, but that much water silly. Orc stay where orc is, safe that way. Green skin, green muck.

Me in Jeywafa tribe. No other tribe use magic. Some use god-power, like friend Shaman. No magic. Will tell more why later. Jeywafa tribe in south muck with many other tribe. Far north, past big cold hill, them north tribe. Almost never see them.

Live tribe life. Hard life sometimes. Gotta hunt stuff, gotta grow stuff and things. But stuff hunts us too. Humans sometimes hunt. Elves sometimes hunt if mad. Beasties hunt... evil lizards, mean apes, big rats. But we strong. Fathers and their fathers and their fathers, all strong. They fight for land, they fight and protect treasures. They keep biggest treasure super safe, so smart orc can do job.

Biggest treasure called 'Voodoo Engine'. Stupid name. Super good treasure. Orc do magic near Voodoo Engine, it make things go. Smart orc do work of ten dumb orc. Engine mines, and digs, and chops, and farms. Engine do what Chief says. Quiet magic hands just do work for orc. That why smart orc important. Only smart orc do magic.

But big problem.

Orc who do magic get dumb. Is orc curse. Shaman say old-old orc insult elf goddess. Call her dumb. Elf goddess say, 'We see who dumb!' So each magic done, orc brain get tiny. Happen quick too. Orc friend do two spells, get real dumb. Walk into lizard pit next day, got eaten. Chief say he better off that way. Smart orc don't think so, but who me to say?

So father's father's fathers come up with smart plan. Use magic that make orc smarter! They try. After many smart orc get dumb, they find spell that work. But orc curse take all extra smarterness away. So no real use... until Voodoo Engine. Use magic to make smartness and lose smartness near Voodoo Engine. Makes things go, use quiet magic hands. Tribe get stuff done.

Smartness magic eats bit of copper every time. So some of Voodoo Engine used to mine and some to smelt. Smartness magic make smart orc tired and hungry. So some Voodoo Engine used to farm. But enough left to do much work. Smart orc super important, not get beaten much. Not much.

Smart orc only allowed use one spell. Only smartening spell, so brain don't get small. But chief don't know. Shaman teach me not-smart spell. Spell that hurt and push. Shaman say, 'Dis break ribs. Dis make dem spin and fly. Like get hit by angry horse moving fast.' Saw orc get hit by fast horse once... he no live long. Shaman say, 'Smart orc use only if gonna die. Or brain turn to mush.' Good talk. Shaman good guy. Smart orc not try hurty spell, but will if gotta. Rather be dumb alive orc. Not dead smart orc.

Many seasons all the same. Wake up, feed Engine with smartening spell, rest. Five times, more if can. Crawl to fire, eat what left after bashers eat. Spend time with Shaman. Big sleep. Start over next day.

Life in village more rough now. Not like seasons before. Days longer, getting hotter. More hotter than ever. Voodoo Engine dig wells deeper, so orc no drink muck-water. Go very far, still find less meat, find less nuts and berries. Crops turn brown. Less tiny orc around. Some orc go to find better place. Never come back. Some orc go to rob humans. Never come back. Bashers blame smart orc for all. All smart orc get beaten more. All smart orc get thin.

Hard to sleep. Me have bad dream. Me get smaller. Voodoo Engine get bigger. Ask more from smart orc. Take more from smart orc. Get bigger and bigger, crush all orc. Crush human, crush elf. Voodoo Engine crush human town and elf trees. It bash mountains and fill sea. Then Voodoo Engine all that left. Tiny magic hands smash world. Wake up with more sweat than ever.

Still night. Tummy empty. Me smart, know when to sneak off. Just wait til bashers pass. Then go. Bashers count bad. Can't count one less smart orc. Me cross at dry spot. No lizard pit there. Cross small orc hill to big wild hill. No basher catch me now.

Me know trees give nuts high on hill. Secret just for smart orc, no share with chief. No share with bashers. Climb very hard, sore from beating. Me no mind. Is less hot when me go high on hill. Try to be quiet though, very quiet. Orc not only thing in dark.

Best nut tree not very tall. Easy climb. But as pouch fill with nuts, see light close by. Then smell fire. Orc really not alone here! Something made camp. Something... cook meats. Smell oil-smoke on wind. Make mouth water, but me know this bad place for oil-smoke. Bigger beast here. Meaner. Love cooked meats. But love raw meats even more. People meats.

Me climb next branch, slide to next tree. Then next tree. Closer to camp. Near fire, two shadow. They eat. Not know danger. Move like human... smell like human. Dumb like human. They no hear rustle. No hear cracked branch. They eat, and talk. Talk, talk, talk. Human can talk self to death. They so loud, huge ape walk right over. They no see shadow. They no smell musk.

They no see me take out Rock.

Chief not nice. But Chief teach one thing: Orc always take Rock. Nice, heavy, round Rock. Rock bash things. Can laugh at Rock rolling down hill. Stupid Rock. Rock save stuff and things from wind. Rock see how deep hole is. Rock mark the spot.

...or throw Rock at ape who like people meats.

Rock always useful. Must try get Rock back, after it clunk ape on head.

Ape yell, very loud. Men at fire jump up. No try to run. No draw blade. Men mumble and point and wave arms. Magic! Human do magic! Me slide down tree and run behind closer tree. Need see real magic. And get Rock.

Tall man split into four tall man. Ape yell and swing fist at one. It pop like sparkly bubble. Short man point at ape. Glowing darts shoot out, make ape roar and bleed. Mostly make ape angry. It swing both fist, pop other two copies. Last tall man point, gout of fire hit ape. Hill smell like cooked monkey now.

Ape hurt bad, but see way to win. Pick up tall man, throw at short man. Big one scream, little one can't finish magic. Men lay in pile, ape pick up log to bash both pests.

Me don't know human. Don't know why orc should help. Smart orc should sneak away, ape busy bashing and eating. Maybe me dumber than smart orc. Dumb to care what happen to human. Orc do

care though. Must be dumbest smart orc in tribe.

Shaman say, point both hands. Like telling angry horse: Stop! Then me say words. Very quick spell. Ape not know what happen. Ape fly over man-pile, bash head on tree. Sound like branch snap. Smoking, bleeding, bashed ape roll down hill long way.

Then me feel it. Like part of me poured into river. Still remember stuff and things, but don't understand. Fall down by fire. So warm.

Shadows above me. Friends? Don't care, steal their warms.

Man yell at other man. Can hear words. Shaman teach some human speak, have idea what they say.

Tall man say, "What in the hells just happened?"

Short man say, "He just saved our lives, that's what happened. Only the Jeywafa orcs still use magic."

Tall say, "This is incredible. I thought they were a myth!"

Short say, "Does he look like a myth to you? Quick, get him a blanket, he looks very much the worse for wear."

Blanket warm. Fire warm. Dem no threat. Watch pretty flames. Rest here.

Short say, "He's drained. If the stories are true, they normally only use intellect enhancement magic to feed an Arcane Syphon. That Force Bolt spell sucked away his core intelligence."

Tall say, "Holy... well there's nothing we can do about that, right? Shouldn't we get out of here so that the rest of his tribe doesn't see him consorting with humans?"

Human move away. Human argued. Me watch pretty fire. After more noise, human come back.

Tall say, "Okay, fine. No, you're absolutely right. If he can't cast, then he's as good as dead. So let's make sure he can cast, right?"

Small say, "...okay. Right. Do you know the spell they use?"

Tall snort and say, "Of course. It got me through my last two years at the Arcane University! Give me a copper piece."

Tall put shiny in orc hand. Then he say, "Repeat after me." He say words... me know words. Heard words so many times. But can't say. Not say right. Rather sleep.

Tall turn to Small, "He isn't getting it. He can't do it."

Small paced. "Then we need to give him the amulet."

There was quiet. Long quiet.

Tall say, "I'm not opposed. But you should know it's a third of our profits."

Small say, "I know."

Tall, "If you're comfortable with that, then..."

Small, "I'm neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with that, but we wouldn't be around if--"

"I know."

"I mean we'd be dead if-"

"I know!"

"Okay then."

Tall go get something out of pack. Shiny. He put chain on orc neck.

"Now, repeat after me."

This time, words flowed. More easy. Orc remember he smart orc. Words mumbled. Copper gone.

Me smart orc again.

Small stood. "Well there you go."

Tall smiled. "Welcome back big guy. What you have there is an Amulet of Enhanced Enchanting. It's a learning aid for spoiled royal brats whose rich parents want them to learn magic." The smile faded. "Never take it off. Never show it to anyone. You'll need it to do your magic from now on."

Me nodded. Then asked important thing:

"You'se got food?"

Human got much food. Meats. Dry fruits. Some food they call 'iron ration'. Not iron though. Not even taste like iron. Me like anyway.

Human spend long time talking. Smart orc spend long time eating.

They want know about tribe, Voodoo Engine, magic. Me tell human dangers in hills. Tell about swamp lizards and rats and stuff and things. Got more pale. Was funny.

Me want know about roast meats, mostly. But also about amulet.

Tall explained, "Ah! So an Amulet of Enhanced Enchanting gives all of your enchantments a little bit of help. Ummm. It makes them last somewhat longer, and it makes casting them somewhat easier. Unlike a wand or a scroll, the magic is still powered by you. But mastering your enchantment based magic will simply be easier."

Small added, "Yes, and it works with all enchantments, but you can put it into a teaching mode for a particular spell. That means you should perform your first Enhance Intelligence as soon as you possibly can each morning. That should 'train' the amulet, and for the rest of the day the spell you've primed it with will be even easier. We'll give you some spare copper so that none is missed by your tribe. As long as you make it a habit, nobody should notice a difference when you start work."

Me grunted. "Easy magic. Hide amulet. Cast in morning. Got it."

Small turn to Tall. "You see? Not all students are hopeless."

Tall say, "He has cast over half a dozen spells a day, every day, for several years. Around ten thousand spells in his life. Are you sure **he's** the student?"

Small look thoughtful.

Tall tell story, place called 'Arcane University'. Much magic, in cold hills. Teach smart magic... no beating. No starving. Wonder if story real or make-up story.

Not matter, ate chicken.

When story done, me stand up, slow. "Good story. Me get back now. You move soon, tribe wake soon."

Tall say, "Thank you. It was an uncommonly brave thing you did for a couple of strangers. I'm Rick, and this is Will. We run The Magic Shop over in Limt. If you ever make it out that way, we owe you a drink. We owe you more than a drink really, but we can start there."

Me grunt. Tell them name. "Sorch." Then walk home. Right after take back Rock.

Walk down hill easy. Not from full belly. Something else.

Never met people like dat. Shaman maybe, no other. Not about human or orc. People look past tribe. Look past green skin, past smarts. Know more life than muck. Not afraid of world. Only afraid of not living good life.

I know then. I know, live brave better. If die being brave, fine. Not stupid basher-kind of brave. No charge ten muck lizard. Smart orc kind of brave. Change life kind of brave. Save tribe by look past just tribe. Find answer out there, in world... somewhere.

Me make it home. Lay near big fire. No orc wake up. Some smart orc shift, but no wake. Hope they no have my nightmare. Darkest sleep better.

Just gotta remember: Hide amulet. Cast in morning. Share nuts.

Hide amulet. Cast in morning. Share nuts.

Hide in morning, share nuts.

Hide nuts.

Nuts.

Chapter 2

Something different today.

Morning like normal. I wake up. Share nuts with smart orcs. Feel like forget something.

Go to Voodoo Engine, use smartening spell. Seems easier than ever. Remember that I supposed to do one before get to work. Oops. Humans not here to nag, is okay. Will remember next time.

Don't need to rest as much. Use smartening spell again. Tired but... something happening. Not sure what yet. Feel good though.

Feed Voodoo Engine all day. When basher come, have idea. Before can hit, tell him other basher need see him about wife. He look angry and go. Yelling happen... lots of it. Basher no come back to hit smart orcs. Make job better.

Do eight smartening today. Not feel so tired, go see Shaman early. Walk into holy tent. He look surprised.

Tell Shaman feel good today. He look at me. Look at me long time, like basher trying to count. Says to sit, so I sit.

Little flying lizard stare at me. Like to think I Shaman's best friend. Little lizard might be instead. Lizard name 'Lizzy'. Shaman say she holy gift from god Kenvunk. I not so sure. Lizzy sit on perch and stare. Creepy thing.

He light smoke weed... smell funny, but good. Wave smoking weed all over me. Look again, like try to see fish in muck water.

"You smart."

I blink at shaman. "Yes, I smart orc. You know dat."

Shaman shake head. He trace smoking weed around my head. "No, you smart like me now." He tap my chest. I go stiff... he touch amulet. Look down, see it glowing through shirt! "Wat dat? Kenvunk say is magic."

Kenvunk old orc god. Shaman love Kenvunk. He say Kenvunk bring big lizards in war time, and small lizards when hungry. Kenvunk make magic thing glow when Shaman ask.

I never lie to Shaman. Not gonna start now.

"I do dumb thing. Save humans up in hills from big ape. Use spell you teach, made me dumber. They give me dis. Say it help cast smartening spell, so I not useless."

Shaman nod. He circle me, waving weed stick all around. "Sorch. Not just amulet magic. **You** magic too."

Sit quietly. Not know what to say. Let Shaman do his thing, he good guy.

Shaman think real hard. He throw weed stick in brazier, smoke fill tent slowly. See Lizzy's eyes get hazy.

"Me think you still got smart spell on you."

Blink at him again. "You crazy. You know curse! Smart sucked out after use spell, silly."

He poke in head. "Shush."

Shaman go digging in magic trunk. Take out book. I know book, has push spell in. He open to page and hold in front of me. "You read this to me."

I do. "In days past, orc live as one with world. These magics from time before great curse, when..."

Shaman snap book shut. I jump a little.

"Perfect. Was perfect. You never read nothing that perfect."

We both quiet for a while. Shaman best friend... only real friend. Don't want to disappoint now and say something stupid. Think about offering amulet to him, he use better than me maybe.

Before I say something, he say something. "You know I no use book much. Not any reason. Power come from Kenvunk, only know enough magic to teach new smart orcs."

I nod. Still glowing a little. Hope that wear off soon.

Shaman tap book with finger. "Dis for you. You come here everyday after work. I tell chief need you to test healing stuff, he no care. You come, you study. And..."

He put book back, take out lizard-hide. Has pages in between, but nothing on pages.

"And you write. As good as you can, you write what happening. We figure dis out. Maybe Kenvunk send you to break ancient orc curse. Maybe you his baby or stuff and things. We see."

I nod. "For you, I do dis. Owe you everything. If... if you want amulet, I give. No one beat you, all look up to you. Could be great leader, greatest leader."

Shaman throw hands up in air. Cough some from smoke. Then say, "You dumb. Dis happen to you for reason. Smart orc don't trade fate for muck. Kenvunk say so, and I say to you. He order you to not be dumb. Okay?"

Me smile. First time smile in long time. "Okay."

Next day started same. Not feel like did night before. Feel slow... slow in head too. Maybe it all dream.

Notice fist closed... tied closed with stringy vine. Wat is dis?!

Untie hand. There piece of copper in it. Part of human coin, chipped, melted.

Dat when I understand: Smart orc leave message to self.

Check pouch... all human coins cut up. Shaman make Voodoo Engine do it real quick. Not for spending then, for magic. Remember now, Sorch supposed to cast one smartening **before** get to work. Get ready for day, but on way to Voodoo Engine, stop and cast smartening spell. Gotta 'teach' to amulet for day. Seem to work... not explode or nothing.

Work seem to go by fast. Feed Engine, stuff get done, not too tired today. Don't remember if get beat up. Maybe, but not bad if so. At end, feel like feel yesterday. Maybe better than that too.

Go to Shaman tent... things look different. Little table in corner. He have some bread crust for me on

little table. He have candles for me. Lizard book, ink, feather for me. Shaman make me tiny work spot.

He wave me in. "Come, sit, sit." He get magic book out of magic trunk, plop down on my table. "You start at start. You learn all about why magic work, then you learn everything about why smartening spell work. Then you write what learn, no fancy words. Kenvunk say you need eat more, so you eat."

I do what Shaman say, cuz he good guy. Learn about magic come from weave of strings of power. Not strings for boots, strings you no see or touch. They called 'ley lines'. Something about volcano, and ocean, and metal, and salt, and other stuff and things. Don't explain smartening, but write down real simple anyways. Dis big book, will take long, long time for read.

When done, I go to fire to sleep. Don't want to sleep. Want to feel like this, always. I tie piece of coin into hand, so dumb morning-me remember. I hug book I make note in, wrapped in cloak. Too tired to stay up, feel brain get smaller anyway. Have Voodoo Engine dream again. Not nice.

Wake up, remember to use smartening because coin trick. Then look at book. Notes are simple. Even dumb-smart orc understand smart-smart orc's notes. Go drop note book off at Shaman's. Try quick read of spellbook... is all gobbledygook. Bah. Will read when smart-smart.

Come back after work, and I read spellbook fine. Shaman look smug, he right about simple notes, he right about smarter after work. Sick of Shaman being right, but that his job.

Make simple note on next bit. It talk 'bout angels and demons, used to make war all over land. Then old gods make some kind of bet. Nobody know what bet was. But angels and demons banned from Panos, got to live in clouds or deep in ground. Human, orc, and elf all created. Silly orc and also orc battle god Kenvunk make magic girl-god, Omi-Suteth, angry. Put curse on all orc, that where magic-dumbness come from.

Lizzy read over shoulder. Sometimes wonder flying lizard understand better than me.

Next night get to real magic stuff. Smartness spell made by Glogur the Defiant. He angry orc. After first big war between human and elf, but before next big war between elf and orc, Omi-Suteth curse Glogur, and Glogur curse Omi-Suteth. He say he use magic, 'cuz he smart orc. So he make spell that make him smarter before being dumber. Not useful, 'cept as insult to Omi-Suteth. She ignore him.

More important: How spell work. Copper have some value, is kinda rare. That sacrifice. Also make you little tired. That sacrifice. Human and elf use for hard study, cuz spell make them too weak. But orc tough, it just make them feel like running hard for while. Can cast many times before sleep. Not useful without Voodoo Engine though.

I make all simple notes, then talk to Shaman before bed.

"Don't see how this help. Still work like dis: Cast and get smart, then get dumb again right away."

Shaman pace. He think. "You keep going in book. There more spells."

I blink. "But if spell don't make smart, I no cast. It eat my brain!"

"Aha!" say Shaman. "But brain bigger right now, yes? 'Cuz you can read stuff and things now you can't in morning."

I nod slowly. "Yes. Guess brain bigger now. So?"

"So you not shrink normal small brain. You shrink big night brain, which shrink anyway in morning.

Yes?"

Shaman logic flawless.

I say, "But I shrink brain, I not know how to do hard spells no more. Not 'til next night."

Shaman nod. "Yes, you have one, maybe two magics you can do before it eat your normal brains. But that more than any other orc in thousand years!"

That really heavy thought to think. I stay quiet.

Shaman thump me on shoulder. "You keep reading. More spells in book. Not just push and hurt. I not smart 'nuff to read them. You, maybe. You read more, we try something when you know next spells."

So I do that. Next few days the same. Same dream, same work. Only not-same thing: Read more book.

Read about hard spells, but not get past start. Then read easy spells. Took many hour, but understand some. Lots need stuff and things we don't got... goat horn, marble bowl, live seagull? Silly stuff.

But three new spell, I get. Three new spell, I gots stuff for already. I spend two week with Shaman after work, just putting new magic in brain while brain still big. I make simple notes I can read in morning, helps some. When pretty sure I got new spells in brain, talk to Shaman 'bout them.

"So you knows smart spell, hurty push, and three new things?"

I nods. "Yes, yes. First make place bright like brightest day."

Shaman snort. "Boring!" He think for minute. "But could be useful, maybe. Some stuff don't like daytime. Still boring."

I roll eyes. "Uh huh. Next is cold spell. It make big spray of cold, deadly stuff."

Shaman slap his knee. "Dat's the stuff. You freeze heads off, you doin' good. What else?"

I roll neck til it make popping sound. Feel good. "Last makes fire sword outta burnt stick."

Shaman's eyes get real wide. "What?! Fire sword? You no kid me? Try dat one!"

I not sure. "Uhhh, we sure 'bout dis? It just gonna make me dumber out of added smarts, yes?"

Shaman nod and wave hand in air. "Yes, yes. You worry too much. It like smartness spell, use extra smarts up first. You done notes, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then show!"

I take deep breath. Grab old dead torch from trash. I close eyes, make magic finger wiggles, say magic words. Only take couple seconds. Suddenly, feel the drain, in head and in gut.

But dis time, got cool flame sword for trouble!

Shaman jump out of seat and stare at it. Hilt look metal, but blade on fire like covered in pitch. "Real magic." he say, softly. "Praise Kenvunk."

I look at sword. Is curved one, like see from picture of desert folk. Feel light in hand, good balance. Not much of sword guy, but still like.

Shaman have many question, answer what I can. Yes, can be any kind of blade I see in brain. It last a few minutes. No can't give away or throw, it go away when leave hand. Stick gotta be burnt, but can be smaller. Last question important though.

"How smart you feel?"

Hard question. "Think... think maybe smart like at noon break. Couldn't read book right now, don't think. But not morning-dumb."

Shaman nod. "So two spell at best. No try more, don't want brain eaten. Still. Two spell a night, think what you do with that?!"

I tilt head. "Uhhh. What I do with that? You wanna freeze a head off after I done with work?"

That stumped Shaman. "I... no. Guess not. Guess three hour after done with work not big time to do much." He look annoyed.

I sit there quiet. Still got fire sword. Awesome.

Then Shaman thump table hard. "Aha! You got all that stuff in book. How magic work, right?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Then you use better smarts spell."

I shake head. "No, it not in there. Read titles of all spells, only one smarts spell, we know dat one."

Shaman look like he wanna thump me. But not with fire sword in hand. "No, dummy. You **makes** better smarts spell. Use all new stuff you know, and you makes better one."

I nod, slowly. "I try, for you. But may take long time."

Shaman shrug. "I got nowhere to be."

So for weeks and weeks, me go study magic. Study how make new magic, study how to make big smarts. End of every day, Shaman make me show a spell. He say it get me use to drain. I think he just wanna see cool magic.

Sometimes being tired help me sleep. Sometimes bad dream. Like sleep better. But had good dream too. Same one since young. Was in mountains. Very cold. But kept warm by something white, fluffy. People need me there, and I need them. Have friends, and no bashers hurt smart orc. Seemed real.

See good dream almost never. When hungry and tired, when catch beating from basher, that dream keep me going.

Food getting more low. Bashers go out hunting, more and more far. Less come back. Some family sneak away at night. Some not so lucky. Shaman don't got extra scraps for me no more.

Shaman no like it, but skip one reading time during week. We go out to small lizard nest. Dangerous. But starving orc more dangerous. At night, we take cart. Me, Shaman, and Lizzy. We go where muck meet hills, place where eyes-that-shine gather. Leave cart on low hill, go toward muck. We climb big rock though, can look down and count eyes. Six eyes.

Shaman got plan. I think not good plan, but got none better. First he bless me. I no worship Kenvunk,

but always make me feel better. Then he climb to tall rock. Gray-green skin, hard see at night. He point rattle at biggest pair of eyes, ask Kenvunk for creature help. Big eyes go glassy. Lizzy fly above third and hisses, angry. Get lucky, two eyes get spooked, swim off.

Now know what two eyes are dinner.

I slide down side of rock, into muck. Big lizard get closer. Get closer very quick. Hand shake. Grab water flask and squeeze, spray water at eyes-that-shine as I chant. Wave of cold hit so hard, can hear scales crack. Lizard's roar stop half way. Muck turning to ice-muck, need to step back.

Shaman keep chanting, need to keep other lizard sleepy. But I in trouble, he know it. Cause my lizard cracking ice, and still coming. It mad now.

Mad, but slow.

Maybe it cuz brain got smaller, but I not 'fraid. Lizards gots cold blood. You make colder, they no like. They move super slow if get cold.

Is okay. Gonna warm it up.

Few chanted words, and kindling stick become big honkin' sword on fire. I no basher, but I grab with both hand and start bashin'. Now lizard don't wanna come get me, wanna run. But I hack it good, twice, and it sizzle. Maybe good bashing from Kenvunk blessing. Maybe 'cuz I angry and dumb after second spell. Anyway, good bash.

Big eyes is spooked by sounds, turns and swims away. My lizard also turn. Know I can't chase out there, die for sure. Start to reach for trusty Rock for final try. No need. Lizzy see real good, warn Shaman. Shaman now got new chant. Kenvunk give him big spell at night. Moonbeam shine on lizard. It flop around like just hit with mallet. Then lizard lay real quiet.

It take both of us long time to get big lizard on cart. Lizzy snack on one of lizard's eyes. Take hour to roll it back. Nobody question big dead frozen burnt lizard in camp. And bashers get lucky on hunt too, everyone eats good. One good day mean nobody starve, not for now.

In morning, Shaman got all kind of test for me. Then again at break, again at night. He say that Kenvunk say I just as smart still. Two spell work good.

I tell Shaman, "Hunt was good, but we get lucky. Need more than two magics, if unlucky."

He point at writing book. "Well you get smarter! How close for smarter smartening magic?"

I admit, "Almost done but... problem."

Shaman tilt head. "What problem?"

"Need silver."

Shaman shoulders fall. He sigh. "We no got it. No use it. North tribes use for fight undead, we no got here. What bits we get on raid, we trade."

I nod. "Yes, that problem. But... know where some is."

Shaman stare at me. He know what I mean. "NO! I forbid. Kenvunk forbid!"

I hang head. Not like make Shaman mad. Not 'cuz he strong... he friend. "Silverfish got much-much silver. Is only way I know."

Shaman almost hiss at me. "Is deadly beast. Kill horse, kill ape, not even hurt after. In cave, no moon magic. Insect, no animal magic. I no help for you!" He sound mad, and sad too.

"Is only way. Need silver to try dis. I do, or we stop. We be happy with two spell."

Shaman stomp foot. "Fine. We happy with two spell."

I snort. "Yes? Two spell not feed tribe. Two spell not stop beatings. Already know: I live brave now, brave for you, for me, for tribe. Brave only chance now. Ask Kenvunk. Ask Kenvunk now, is two spell enough?"

Shaman gnash teeth. He walk to his bones and toss in air. Knew answer before bones even fall. Shaman shoulders slump. "He say... he say you need best plan."

"Then we start tonight."

Chapter 3

Plan done, been done for days. Make some trips to spot outside cave, set up plan. Shaman come one time when Chief away, help with big part. He look awful next morning... Shaman really need beauty sleep. Also I make sure sneak off plan working. Tomorrow full moon, short work day for Kenvunk praying. Start magic late in morning, end magic before dark. If late, chief not get wise. If dead he get wise, but I no care then.

Shaman let me sleep after work, wake me on night guard change. He still argue that he need to come, but if he late for Kenvunk praying, plan ruined. Taking Lizzy though, that part of plan. Gonna be three hour hard hike. Lizzy good night eyes, help me move quick, help me dodge wild stuff and things.

Walk into hills never simple. First dodge orc patrols. Not just our tribe, all tribe. See many Fistuntuls with blue war paint and long spear. They loud, easy to hide. Deep into hills, see lone Nightbane orc. And she see us. She move hammer hand to hand, but then walk on. Is good, want no part of hammer-maiden, bad news there.

As move away from muck, trees change. Look less healthy. Everything more dry, branches thin, leaf rubbery or baked. Sap thick, like old blood. Less moss, less grass. Whole middle of hike feel dead. Up and down hills, not matter. Like forest just give up. Not used to be like this, not when young. This part just as green as near muck, many seasons past. Not now.

Last hour walk pretty quiet. Start get more green toward mountain river. Hear more chirp, more click, more alive. Raise mood some. Lizzy not being mean, mostly. Even caught small rat. We split rat.

Get to camp outside one of caves that goes to Silverfish lair. Is next to river. River flow down hillside, between rock and dirt. Remember when young, go way high in hill. River start with many tiny stream. Then all stream meet near warm spring, and all water gush together. River not as big as seasons back, but still big. That mean cave will be wet, Silverfish like wet.

Camp pretty big. Tree all over outside. High part cover with dirt. Slope down to low part, all bare rock. Flat rock on ground from stone wall near river, to opening for cave. Lizzy perch on stone wall by river, grooming. I get wood, left last time visit. Still dry... doesn't rain much now. Use rock and metal, start fire on dirt way off to side of camp, on high side. Build fire is okay here, beasts no hunt near Silverfish, and Silverfish no like fire.

Go over things, in case bad stuff happen. Three cave can go to Silverfish lair; this smallest, tightest. Basher in armor or Silverfish barely fit through thin bit. Take no metal, Silverfish smell metal good. I strip off most gear, not gonna need much. Keep Rock though. Rock important.

Go over escape plan. Camp pretty safe, but chance Silverfish chase anyways if I screw up and it angry. It always angry. Orc tribe close to here say it hunt for sport. Find dead... parts spread all over. No reason. Never see in day though. So if it chase, get close to fire as can. Leave two bigger branch hang out of fire. Good for burney bashing.

I mutter plan to self, over and over. See Lizzy staring, like I crazy. I snarl. Lizzy snarl back. I sigh.

Time to go.

Loop long rope around thick tree. Tie off. Run rope end into cave, twenty pace, leave as guide. Realize how much of plan just use rope and string... scary thought. Tie piece of long string around

pinky. Lizzy fly over, let me tie string to tail. Start to think Lizzy know plan better than me.

Lizzy fly in cave, I follow. First forty paces, can stand. Then for ten steps gotta duck. Then all crawl. Real dark inside, not even moonlight. Lizzy signal me if Silverfish in, or out for hunt. Long time waiting. What if Lizzy get ate? Shaman **kill** me if Lizzy get ate. Not hear nothing. Start to wonder if this all long joke from Shaman. If so, real good one.

Feel sharp tug on finger. Two. Silverfish is in. Slow and quiet, I crawl in. At tight point, feel clothes scrape cold wall. Feel pouch press into belly. Never like small place. Never like dark place. What I doing here? Plan dumb. Shaman dumb. I dumb to listen. Feel string tug again. Dumb flying lizard.

Cave open back up again, enough to stand. So slowly. So quiet. Small tugs on clothes. Bitey flying lizard line me up. Then feel string flutter when Lizzy bite through. Lizard fly out now, job done. Wind string up and put in pouch. Feel inside... Rock still there. Somehow, feel better now.

Know what gotta do. Would be dumb stand there and wait for Silverfish to find. But I just think how dumb I gotta be, so... no, no. Plan is best plan. Shaman say so.

Is time.

I hold hands high in front, way up in air, like announcing important thing to tribe. Not just say magic words, **scream** magic words. Silverfish about to know where orc is anyway. Maybe scare it some. It never hear smart orc with magic. Not many have.

Feel the drain, make sure plan still in head when brain shrink. It is. The lair fill with light, like noon sun right inside. Can see now, lair is fifty paces deep, twenty paces wide, two orc tall. Smell like death. Everything glitter, wet or metal. Silverfish almost look like glowing, while it scream. Sound like ape mix with demon get squeezed to death.

If I was as smart as at start of night, might not have stared at it for so long. But first spell like first drink: Make you dumb enough to go do dumb thing, and dumb enough to drink more.

Silverfish like nightmares. Tall like child orc. Long like two orc. Eight legs got big claws. Head got two antenna, look like whips. So does butt, with huge stinger too. Body like bug, plated silver. Crouching away from fake sun. It hate sun. I throw Rock at it. Not even hit, but it hate me even more than sun. It scream again, make spine feel like cracked glass.

Time to run.

I dive back into tiny cave. At least light from behind now. Light go away when squeeze through tiny part. Hear Silverfish right behind. Feel it right behind. For second, think I'm stuck. If stuck, I dead. Pull hard with arms and push with legs... make it through.

Claw at ground to try get away. Don't want hear scream, cause each one louder, closer. Crawl forward enough to turn and sit up. No light from lair, huge body blocking. Just firelight behind me. As Silverfish squeeze through tiny bit, I yell, "Lizzy!"

Now two thing happen at same time.

One thing, I use other spell. Fire from camp let me aim. Bolt like wild horse fly from hand. Miss Silverfish, it charging too quick. Is okay. Silverfish not where aim. Big pile of rocks in nets near roof held up by wood, now behind Silverfish. Hit wood part real hard. Rocks in nets fall, roll back. Block tightest part of cave just when Silverfish through.

Other thing happen, Lizzy finish chew through vines.

If one thing smart orc know, smart orc know rocks. Shaman know water. Help carve out spot on river bank. Little rock wall where me and Shaman dig behind, so mostly little rock wall and some lizard hide holding back water. Patch with moss and stuff and things. Then we haul up real heavy bit.

Lizzy-vine hold big-big rock in tall tree. Big-big rock fall now, smash little rock wall near river. Little rock wall we build before now just pile of nothing.

Much of river now charging into little cave.

Grab guide rope just in time. Water crash over me, crash over Silverfish just behind. Hold onto rope so hard, palms bleed. Rocks in nets mostly clogging back of cave now. If let go of guide rope, get pinned and drown. Gotta hold on til more water, til easier to climb out.

Silverfish no have rope, but strong. It fight against new river smashing it down. It lunge at me and I feel it. A big claw rake right side, that hurt. Second claw dig into left shin though, and body feel like on fire. Feel claw on bone. Want to scream, but need keep air, or die. Only good part is, two less claw on slippy rock make Silverfish slide back. Too much water, too much pressure. Hear one last demon scream before ears cover with water.

Probably dying now. But after spells, too dumb to know for sure. Feel arms working, pulling broken orc body out of flood cave. Fight pressure, fight new river. Follow guide rope as leg go numb, as chest burns, as shoulders scream. Body going to give up and try to breathe like fish. But next pull on rope make head find air. Gasp it in. Keep pulling on rope until dragged up to camp. Collapse by fire.

If Silverfish live, should burst out of water-full cave soon. But never happen. Even insect need breathe, so say Shaman. Silverfish is drowned, helping clog little hole with our rocks and nets now. In end, magic ambush, traps, and lotsa water did what whole tribes not do.

Not bad for dying smart orc.

Something in head still work. Know it will hurt, but grab one of burny bashing sticks from fire. Press against left leg. Scream. Wet pants steam, broken flesh burn. But blood stop. Can't see bone now. Throw stick back in fire. Go into bags, find Shaman's moss and bandages. Put most moss on leg, wrap tight. Put little moss on side and wrap up chest. Use rest of bandages to wrap bleeding hands. Then wait minute to see if gonna die.

Nope.

River now all backed up, flowing over entire rock part of camp. Water circle, then spill back into main river between two trees. Not much of stone part show now. But dirt part of camp now have good riverside view.

Lizzy land on wrist. Look smug for flying lizard. Did good job though, so give special treat that Shaman packed. Bone marrow from giant rat. Doesn't take Lizzy long to finish. Then we go 'round hill, to bigger cave. Me grab mostly empty sack. Grab other burney branch, daylight spell done by now. Limping bad, but moss help with some pain. If make back to tribe, not going to get any sleep before rituals. If not make back to tribe... screw rituals. Kenvunk gotta keep smart orc living if he want any thanks.

Bigger cave not as steep or narrow anywhere. Can walk right down to lair. Flooded parts, but not bad. Even with rocks and nets and Silverfish body, some water still getting into lair. Good though, wash away some of bad smell. Grab Rock first, most important. Then reach into puddles and gather

all silver pieces. Throw in sack. There more metal, but all rusted. Lose count after hundred silvers. But at least that much more again. A couple of silver rings and chains, take them too. Seven silvers look very strange. Weird face on them, weird color. Put them in pouch for later.

Go back to camp, gather things, put out fire. Lizzy going to have to navigate. Too much pain. Must concentrate on where feet go, one slip and smart orc might not get back up. Lizzy always tugging on clothes, steering orc here and there. She probably save me ten times, can't really know. Not smart now. Not well either. Life is Lizzy's now.

Flying lizard true friend though, Shaman raise her good. If she ever has clutch of eggs, would love to raise baby Lizzy for own.

Was past dawn when make back to tribe. Problem. Guards all around before ceremony. Blood on me, blood in black hair, they see if I go. I stop, crouched behind big rock. Lizzy look confused, then sees what I looking at. Flying lizard go over to guard and hisses. He look annoyed. But look much more annoyed when Lizzy steal his feathered headpiece. As she fly away with it, guards hoot and holler and chase. Let me limp into camp and into Shaman's tent.

Get yelled at by Shaman for getting hurt. Lots of yelling. But can tell he happy to see me. He call on Kenvunk to start healing wounds, and soon feel much better. Still ache like worst beating ever, but not going to die. Shaman say will take another day of Kenvunk healing for leg, but hands feel better and shoulder more okay now.

Shaman fill tent with smoke again, make sure I not cursed, nothing I grab cursed. Only amulet glow. He peers at every coin and chain and ring, make sure they safe. Lizzy come back, without stolen headpiece. She stare at all the shinies.

Shaman say, "You do good. You do real good. Kenvunk proud, I proud. Lizzy proud too."

I grunt. "You take stuff and hide. When chief see me, think I'm done for. Get food for village."

Shaman wave hand in air. "No, no. I got good plan for that. Smart plan. I show you soon, you'll see."

I must not look like I believe, 'cause he scowl at me. I change subject. "Half this yours anyways. Take it, use to barter for food and stuff and things."

Shaman shake head. "All silver coins yours, was point of this. If you force me, I take these rings and chains. Can trade for much food, will really help tribe."

I nod, slowly. No point in argue with friend. Point at seven metal chunks with ugly face. "You take special coins though. Don't know what is anyway."

He lift one up to show. "These electrum. Part silver, part gold. Think from desert tribe somewhere. You keep, may need later."

My turn to be hard head. "You keep. If part gold, could help huge next season!"

He sigh. "Three for village, four for you. No argue now. We hide this stuff in chest, and get you ready for ceremony."

Shaman have dumb plan.

Okay, not dumb plan. But make me feel dumb. I dress in weird lizard skin robe, act as assistant. Ceremony always have people move slow, so nobody really notice how hurt I be. No need to cast more magic, cuz I sitting by Shaman all day and night. Sometimes I use fan on him, or hand stuff and

things from table, or fill cup, or hold book. Even quiet times where catch quick sleeps. Mostly, nobody see how hurt I be.

After ceremony, we figure when try new smartening spell. Two days, after Shaman's healing done on leg, after I sleep some. He get quiet invisible hands to cut up some silver too, so none wasted. Soon we see if this worth time.

Chapter 4

Happy birthday.

I've realized that the orc calendar is good for seasonal planting, but not great for keeping track of annual events. So I adopted the Kingdom calendar, used by both the elves and the humans. It's going to help me track dates and times much better. The Kingdom calendar splits each season into three parts: Early, Mid, and Late. Each part is split into thirty days.

This is Late Summer of the year 2717, day 17. And because I can't be sure, but I want to celebrate anyway, I've declared this to be my birthday.

I'm not really celebrating my natural birth, although it may have been around this time of year if Shaman remembers rightly. I'm celebrating my rebirth, or at least my mental rebirth.

My name is Sorch Stonebender, and I'm a very smart orc.

With the help of my friend Shaman, I've developed a new spell. I call it Augmented Intelligence. The amount of intelligence that is gained is greater than the old spell, and the amount taken back by the curse is far less by comparison. The augmentation lasts longer as well. Eventually, Shaman and I figured out how to make it work as part of my daily routine.

It took several days of tinkering with my sleep patterns, using the old Enhance Intelligence spell to get me to the point where I could understand and cast the new spell, and figuring out how my amulet attuned to a spell for the day. But eventually we did it. I was able to keep enough brain power overnight, so that the first spell I cast in the morning was Augmented Intelligence. The amulet imprinted to it, and any additional castings of it were far more potent.

That was the key. With the new spell imprinted to the amulet every day, I just had to cast it once more at night to keep the cycle going. Even without imprinting, casting the old spell over and over again to feed the Voodoo Engine was helping as well. All of those tiny intellect gains add up.

I end up needing a lot of rest. A full night's sleep, my normal mid-day rest period when I'm working, and another rest period in the Shaman's hut before I study the spell book. We're all eating a little better due to Shaman's keen bargaining skills, and contacts that he's maintained in certain non-orc communities. He deals with one orc sea captain in particular, because he cheats us less than anyone else. The treasure that we shared from the Silverfish's lair has been put to good use. The healthy resting patterns and better diet have really helped me to progress.

There was a wonderful side effect of this healthy living: The Bashers stopped coming around the Voodoo Engine. There were no more beatings. I had supposed that because we were healthy and well fed, and because Shaman was helping to provide for the tribe's needs now, the smart orcs had less of a reason to be targets for angry warriors. But after thinking about it a while, I suspected that the real reason was my new confidence. I would look them in the eye when they passed. They knew that I wasn't afraid. Perhaps they suspected that my confidence was because I was more dangerous. Either way, the smart orcs worked free of bruising and terror, and the Voodoo Engine was humming along better than ever.

But was I really more dangerous? I think so. I've done the calculations. I can cast three non-intelligence spells without risking the new routine, or five spells if I'm willing to fall back to the old intellect enhancement for at least a couple of days. Any more than that would be a permanent

drain.

To be honest, that isn't much of a problem right now. Because I have to dedicate mental energy to an Augmentation every night, I can only realistically prepare a couple of the basic spells, and a couple of the new advanced spells. It isn't a question of intelligence, it's simply a matter of rote memorization and experience. I'll need to master new techniques and find new mentors in order to do more than that.

But now, the good news: I've come to understand three new spells from Shaman's book. Again, I didn't bother with any spells with material components that I had no access to.

The new Levitation spell didn't require any materials at all. I couldn't fly around like Lizzy, but she was fascinated as I was able to slowly drift around the tent, easily able to reach the top of the central support pole.

Spider's Web, sometimes just called Web in the notes, required a little bit of natural webbing from a spider. It produced a field of strong, sticky strands that could slow or stop even a strong orc for some time.

Acid Bolt was quite an eye opener. You needed the innards of a beetle, but the effect was potent. The bolt of acid it shot out ate through wood almost instantly. It was shockingly destructive. Without a doubt, this was the most potent offensive spell in my collection.

I now keep two sets of notes. One set is still in very simple terms, just in case I can't keep up this new routine and I need to start over. But the other set of notes is required to grasp the more complex thoughts and rituals that need to be understood to take on advanced magical spells. I copied all of my spells and all of the simple and advanced notes into a new book gifted to me by Shaman. This one was bound with fresh lizard hide, waterproofed, and made rugged for travel. He said that he would keep my simple notes so that he could teach others if he could, but he didn't want to hold me back. I was grateful for the book, and for the chance to re-organize my thoughts. I told him that I would maintain both books for the moment. My writing had become faster, more precise. It took me less time to keep two sets of notes than it had just one set when I was only working with the copper version of the Enhancement spell.

Shaman was excited when I demonstrated my new powers and new knowledge to him. But every word I spoke seemed to make him sadder and sadder. For days, I was worried. Was I disappointing him? Was the result of our experiment not what he expected? Then I realized: I didn't sound like an orc anymore. I was sounding more like the humans that I met in the hills. He might feel like he's losing his friend.

So the next time we met, I made a conscious effort to talk like we would in the old days. I walked into Shaman's tent after finishing work.

Shaman said, "Oi, you gots ta finish simple note, then plan next thing."

I replied, "No worry, me get done."

Shaman's eyes narrowed. He asks, sharply, "You screw up smartness spell? You miss morning?"

I shook my head quickly, "No, no, I did all."

The older orc practically snarled. "Stop. You no do dat. No act dumb."

Lizzy quietly flapped her way out into the night air. She wanted no part of this argument.

I stammered, "Thought that y-you be more comfortable if--"

My old friend cut me off. "Thought wrong. You talk dumb, mean you think me dumb. Maybe not get every word out of smart-mouth, but follow good enough."

I hung my head. "But whenever I talk... it seems to make you sad. You were never sad when we used to talk. I don't want to lose our friendship."

All of the anger drained from Shaman's face. He took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "No, no. Not you make sad. Well, not smartness make sad. Sit, sit. Me explain."

I sat down, quietly.

Shaman started pacing at the side of my writing desk. "All dis. New book for you, extra shinies for you. More train for you. All dis because me know what come next."

I looked up at Shaman, confused. "Well I hope that my new magic will help on the hunts. I can help feed the village and stuff and things."

The older orc shook his head. "No. Bones been cast. Kenvunk agree. You gotta go."

Those simple words shocked me. I stood up so fast, my chair fell over. "Go? Go where?!"

Shaman's voice remained calm, if a bit sad. "Away. Me know, Kenvunk know, even Lizzy know. You always last to know, 'cause you got big heart. Wanna help all. You smart, but trust too much. That dumb."

"I don't understand, Shaman. Why would I leave? We did all this, we risked our lives, and now you're saying that I can't help around here anymore!"

Shaman pointed his rattle at me. "Dat what I say. You no get it. Bruisers talk. Say you dangerous, cause you no afraid no more. Chief listen, he watch. He see threat in you. He not know all thing, but he no have to. You stay, they kill you in sleep. Maybe not dis season, but next. Or next after."

A chill went up my spine. I hadn't even considered that. "Just because they sense that I might be more powerful, they would kill me rather than let me help the village?"

My old friend nodded. "Yeah. Cause you get too strong, chief afraid you challenge. And if find out you have stuff and things, kill you to take stuff and give things to Bashers. Chief not good guy, not like us."

I was stunned into silence. Of course I knew that the warriors were willing to hurt me, but the threat of death was just now sinking in.

Shaman continued, "So all dis so you can go. Dat why you keep silver, and some fancy coin, and new book. Me keep old book and notes, and we see if any new smart orcs do what you do. I keep eye out for more amulet. But you go."

I must have sounded miserable when I asked, "Where can I possibly go?"

Shaman rolled his eyes. "Anywhere wit' more magic. Anywhere wit' smart folk. You go, you learn. You free now. What you call job? Feed Engine? That not job. Dat being slave. Not for you no more. Kenvunk say go, I say go. Lizzy no care."

My shoulders were shaking. I didn't realize that I was crying until Shaman reached out to rub at my

tears with a calloused gray-green thumb.

“Dare, dare. You dunno how proud me is. Chest gonna burst, dat’s how proud. Best student ever. Know you no worship Kenvunk, not really. But he proud too, he say you got good chance. He say he sorry for what he say to elf-girl, you go tell her dat for him.”

I rubbed my face. “Okay.” I took a deep breath to stop the tears. “Okay. When do I go?”

Shaman shrugged. “Tonight, me guess. Now me tell you, you terrible liar. No hide this from Bashers for long. You sleep, I pack yer stuff. Got copper from human. Got silver from Fish. I pack dat and other stuff and things you need. Burned wood, guts, webs, all we gather. New book, I keep old. Food and water. Pouches and sacks. Big cloak to hide ugly face. Soft gloves to hide ugly hands. And Rock.”

I nodded. “Thank you, old friend.” I laid down to rest. It was dreamless sleep.

And so it was that in Late Summer of the year 2717, on day 17, I was to be reborn. I said my goodbyes to Shaman and to Lizzy. I hoisted my pack and just before midnight, I set out into the hills, alone. I drew the hood of my cloak up over my ugly face and did my best to become one with the night.

Happy birthday, Sorch Stonebender.

Chapter 5

The Merchant's Quarter of Limt was bustling. It was the first day of Early Fall, and many religions would celebrate the turning of the seasons over the course of the next few days. The presence of someone in a full gray cloak with the hood drawn up was nothing new or unusual. The fact that this person might be wearing cloth gloves simply indicated that they were clergy, or perhaps upper class. So I was able to pass through the streets of Limt unmolested and unquestioned.

As I walked along, I proceeded to look over the shop signs. Each hanging plank of wood cast a long shadow in the afternoon sun. Public workers were starting to sweep the cobblestone, preparing the streets for dinner services hosted at the many inns scattered around the area. I was careful not to jostle anyone, and any vendor or passerby who spoke to me received a quiet but polite nod.

Finally, I came across the sign I was looking for. The polished oak plaque simply read 'The Magic Shop'. Not that I could read Common too well, rather I had someone write it down for me at one of the few stops along the way that took my money and didn't ask questions. The pattern of squiggles seemed to match almost perfectly.

I walked into the decently sized establishment. The area in front of the counter had a dozen racks and displays. Behind protective glass was a selection of scrolls and wands. Common herbs and components were in sealed jars along the left wall. Behind the counter, a small selection of necklaces, amulets, and charms could be seen in individual display cases. Stairs in the northeast corner led up to what one could assume was a living area, as it was marked 'Private'. Stairs in the southeast corner led down, to an area marked 'Stock'.

There was a group of three older ladies haggling with the tall proprietor. They were trying to talk him down to 25 pieces of gold for a particular scroll, but he was holding firm at 30. "Really ladies, if you consider that once one of you learns the spell you can teach the others, it really is a steal. The Flat Mule spell can help you to carry heavy loads with perfect control, without the need to feed, shelter, or care for an animal. Even the most novice caster can maintain the Flat Mule for an hour, and masters can keep it conjured for the better part of a day."

I turned my gaze to the smaller shopkeep. He was up on a step stool, restocking herbs. I could tell he was trying to hide a smile. The human's hands deftly placed pre-measured bundles of the plant based spell components into the correct jar, before sealing it tightly.

Apparently the ladies were sold. Money changed hands, the scroll was handed over, and the chatty women exited the store in a rather excited state.

Rick called over to Will, "I told you that the name Flat Mule would catch on."

Will laughed, "It's an awful name. I think the elves call it something boring, like a Disk of Transport. Still, better to be memorable than efficient." He gestured over at me. "You have a customer."

Rick strode towards me, wearing his best winning smile. "Welcome to The Magic Shop, I'm Richard. Were you looking for anyt- sweet holy Vinara!"

Will turned his head sharply to see what had startled his partner so much. What he saw made him tumble gracelessly from the step stool and land square on his ass.

I had thrown my hood back to show off my orcish features and the green tinted skin of my face. My

cloak was hanging open to show them the amulet that played such a major role in changing my life.

“Hello my human friends, it is good to see you again. Are you alright Will?”

The smaller man scrambled to his feet. “F-fine! I’m fine. Rick I’m just going to close the curtains and lock the door...”

Rick nodded, mutely. His mouth was open and working, but he couldn’t seem to get his voice to cooperate.

I murmured, “If I’ve caught you at a bad time, or if this is an unwelcome visit, I can head off. I just wanted to... you had mentioned the name of your shop, and that I should stop by sometime.”

The tall man finally found words. “No, o-of course not! Sorch, you look amazing, it’s particularly... shocking to see you, but not at all unwelcome.”

Having flipped the Open sign to Closed and drawn the red velvet curtains shut in the shop’s front windows, Will hurried over to stand by Rick’s side. “Sorch this is astounding. I think we can safely say that we’re astounded. There’s no other word for it. Are you hungry? We live upstairs, we have a small pantry. I could use a snack.”

I had to admit, “I’m starving. I ran out of supplies a few days ago, and foraging has been slim. I was going to ask if I could give you some money and you could help me to resupply. Most of the merchants that I’ve come across outside of town avoid my patronage.”

Rick smiled. “Come on up and share some bread and cheese with us. You need to tell us everything! And then, of course, we’ll be happy to help you get whatever you need in town.”

Although we had only met once, a brief but intense encounter, the three of us were already conversing like old friends. It had something to do with saving their lives I’m sure.

I explained how the amulet had allowed me to gain a foothold on my intellect, how Shaman had encouraged me to develop a better intelligence enhancement spell. At their prompting, I related most of the details of the adventures that ensued.

“So now I’m using my new Augmented Intelligence spell to attune the amulet. I normally top off with a couple of the old Enhance Intelligence spells after my mid day rest, and just before bed I cast another Augmented Intelligence. That lets me use my supply of copper and silver efficiently, and gives me the freedom to use three or four spells during the day without much risk. It depends on how difficult the spells are and nutrition and rest... lots of factors.”

When I finished I looked at each of the two humans. It didn’t seem like either of them fully believed what they were hearing. Not that they thought I was lying, they just found the tale quite foreign, and were struggling to understand my own intelligence being used as a resource like that.

“Guys... it’s alright, you can say whatever you’re thinking. I won’t be upset.”

Will swallowed a chunk of bread and cheese, just as I tore into mine. He said, “Well I don’t know what I can say. Off the top of my head, I think you’ve done an amazing job discovering how all of this works. I’ve never heard of an orc overcoming the curse of Omi-Suteth, even temporarily. That you’ve not only managed it, but the fact that you’re growing as a spellcaster under those restrictions, is quite a feat.”

Rick nodded in agreement. “And as I mentioned, we owe you more than just that amulet for saving us. I think that we can help you to expand your current spell selection. Heck, I’ve never even heard of

anyone performing an advanced version of Enhance Intelligence. You can likely trade that knowledge for a host of low level spells. In fact, allow us to be the first to make that offer.”

I chewed the sharp cheddar and spiced flatbread slowly. It was an interesting concept. “Well, how about I give you a full inventory of the spells that I know, and you can tell me what the gaps are in my knowledge. Is that fair?”

They agreed that this was a good starting point. I listed off the magics that I had learned: Enhanced Intelligence, Force Bolt, Noon Sunlight, Fan of Frost, Flaming Sword, Augmented Intelligence, Levitation, Spider’s Web, and Acid Bolt.

Rick scratched his chin. “Well, that’s a very eclectic collection Sorch. It skips right over the spells that just about every student knows. Detect Magic, which is the arcane version of what your friend Shaman did to make your amulet glow. Identify, which is quite costly to cast, but is generally seen as an apprentice’s graduation test. And then a smattering of physical manipulations so that even if they flunk out, they’ve learned something useful. As an example, Rope Trick to animate a length of rope. Invisible Servant, which does manual labor... similar to the work done by your Arcane Syphon, but more light-duty.”

Will chimed in, “Flat Mule of course” This earned him a glare from Rick. The smaller human just grinned and continued. “Of all of the ones that we mentioned, Detect Magic is the one you’ll want to learn right away. Knowing whether or not a seemingly mundane item is magical can save your life. We have that one in our books, or plenty of copies on scrolls in the shop if you needed to travel immediately. Identify you’ll want to learn, but it consumes a fairly pricey gem when done correctly, so we can hold off on that until you’re well established.”

Rick added, “I’m going to suggest that you learn Invisible Shield as well. You’re already well into combat magic, and this is one of the most basic defensive spells. And... Will, you know Silence right?”

Will nodded. “I do. Silence is particularly good for you if you’re going up against other mages. If you and your typical elven or human mage are both in a cone of silence, your more impressive physique might give you the advantage.”

I finished my latest helping of bread and cheese. “So you’ll teach me these, and I’ll share my Augmented Intelligence ritual. Is that fair?”

Rick laughed a little bit. “More than fair. Sorch, if we were to do tutoring for a spell so obscure or so rare that it isn’t common knowledge at the University, we would make a hefty profit. If it really is unique and nobody else has ever crafted a similar spell, you deserve more than a handful of common magic.”

The smaller human nodded his agreement. “If we were to re-teach your spell or sell anything related to it such as scrolls, you would deserve an equal share of the profits. We would insist. Eventually we should be able to have a scroll made of the spell, which you could use in an emergency if you needed to restart the process.”

I smiled. “Kind of you. That’s fine with me.” I paused to sip fruit juice from the carved wooden cup that they had provided. “I have something to ask you in addition to helping me to resupply, taking advantage of your knowledge, and getting help when looking for a residence nearby. I’m going to need a steady supply of silver and copper, which means employment or adventure. Could you tell me what my options are?”

The tall man considered. "For you, adventure is easier than employment unless you want to work on a ship. The only orcs around Limt are at the docks, and they rarely do more than pick up shipments or supplies, and then leave again." He turned to Will and murmured, "A houseboat of some kind, that's actually an idea."

Will hmmm'ed. "For Sorch? I can look into it, as a longer term solution. Leave it with me."

Rick turned back to me, "If you could buy or rent a houseboat and berth for it at the docks, it wouldn't look out of the ordinary at all unless you attracted a lot of attention for some reason. Then you could travel up and down the coast as you needed. But back to your question. Adventure, exploration, they can keep you fed and discovering new things. We would be happy to have you along for our next expedition. I believe that is around thirty days away. We'll get the exact date from the caravan company within two weeks. Until then, there's the Bounty Board."

Will winced. "Bounties are dangerous, but they can be valuable. We started off doing bounties, when the shop wasn't realistically going to pay for itself and money was more important than additional stock. There are certain inns that adventurers frequent. We could make some introductions to the proprietors. They generally involve getting rid of a threat to the public safety, finding someone who went missing, and the like. You know: Protection provided, mysteries solved."

I tapped my fingers on the table. "I'd appreciate the introduction. Tonight, I can make camp a short distance outside of town. I don't want my presence to be disruptive. Then you can tell me where you would like to meet, and we can arrange everything in a logical order."

Will snorted, "Don't be silly, you're staying here tonight."

I blinked. "I am?"

Rick looked a bit surprised too, but stayed quiet.

Will smiled broadly. "Of course you are. We have a cot downstairs for when we're out of town, and we have someone else watching the shop. Even someone of your mass shouldn't break it!"

Rick ah-ha'ed. "True, I had forgotten about that. Of course, stay the night Sorch. We still have a lot of questions. If you answer them, we'll share some of Will's famed scrambled eggs with rabbit mince in the morning."

We chatted late into the night. Education was a hot topic. They would send word to the Arcane University and ask for an audience with the Headmaster to discuss the possibility of formal education. Will warned me that such an application was likely not to be answered for a while. Then there would be a few magical aptitude tests. And even if I passed all of the tests at my entrance exams, the next academic year didn't start for months. I was intrigued by the option, and told them to go ahead.

When everyone agreed that it was late and rest was the best option, I headed down to the store room. While my human friends were apologetic that I would be staying in a store room, I don't think they fully grasped the vast divide between our worlds. The store room was fully enclosed, and watertight. Up until this point, the best place I've ever slept was in Shaman's tent, which was still drafty and leaked in the rain. The store room's wide cot was three layers of suspended cloth and leather on a strong wooden frame, without a doubt the most comfortable thing I've ever seen. Normally I'd be sleeping on a pile of crushed reeds covered by an old pelt. Finally, I'd be sleeping through the night... no sneaking off to try to find food or being woken by a rough kick to the ribs from an angry Basher high on Ephen leaves. My human friends had no idea that this would be the

best night's sleep of my entire life.

I let the conversational topics of the night filter through my mind. Discussing the possibility of such things as houseboats and tutoring was an amusing distraction, but I knew the reality of the situation: I was an orc in a city of humans. I would need to tread with care, and avoid drawing any attention to myself. There would be prejudice, and given some of the warlike actions of my people in the past, I could hardly blame the townsfolk if they saw an orc as something savage and uncivilized. For the moment, stealth was a better option than being brash.

And yet, I couldn't allow prejudice to hold me back. While being subtle around the humans, I still need to achieve my goals. So it would help if those goals were a bit more well defined. I sat down at the inventory desk, took up the quill and ink, and jotted down what I wanted to achieve now that I had opportunities and resources close at hand:

One: The amount of copper and silver I went through every week equated to about two pieces of gold in the local currency. Even living off the land, this was the bare minimum amount of resources I needed to maintain my intelligence.

Two: If I wanted to maintain my city based lifestyle and use my time learning new magic, I would need money for food, renting lodging out near the docks from someone who wouldn't ask questions, common spell components, and the like. That would bring my expenses up to five gold pieces a week.

Three: As long as I'm meeting those basic expenses, I want to set aside a quarter of whatever I'm making to send back to Shaman. Even a hand full of gold every month would mean the world to my people. The difference between the tribe dwindling away and the tribe thriving might be my contributions.

Four: To have some measure of security, particularly if I go the adventuring route and need to store the spoils, renting a cottage outside of town would be around 20 gold every week, with all of my other expenses.

Five: If I'm to get the kind of privacy and security that I need in the long term, a houseboat isn't the worst of ideas. It can move if I need to move, there would be almost no reason for people to visit, allowing aggressive trapping and warding should the situation warrant it. From what Will and Rick were saying, costs would range from 2,000 gold pieces to 5,000 gold pieces. The higher the cost, the larger and more seaworthy the boat would be. Of course, the larger the boat, the higher the dock fees.

I paused. My other goals had an uncertain price tag. But best to write them down anyway.

Six: Get an education. Not just magical, but historical, geographical, and general. My world up until this point was all swamps and hills. I need to broaden my mind to stuff and things other than magic and Common vocabulary. Reading and writing in Common, rather than just being familiar with the

spoken version, would be something that I needed to polish over the next few weeks.

Seven: Explore. I have questions about the world that simple instruction and reading will not answer. I want to feel the stinging cold in the high mountains. I want to see the ruins of the ancient desert city of Poth. I want to experience the majesty of the great elven cities, built entirely with magic and divine power. I want to visit the northern orc tribes, known as the great Collective.

Eight: Grow emotionally. I've only had a single true friend my entire life. As I learn and explore, I want to experience the kind of social interaction that a world both civilized and wild can provide.

Finished, I left the page on the desk so that the ink would properly set and dry. I would slide it into the front of my spellbook in the morning, so that I could have a constant reminder of why I was doing what I was doing. I vowed to myself that when I learned more of the written language, I would translate that list from Orcish into Common on the reverse side of the page.

After I cast my nightly Augmentation, I laid down on the storeroom cot. I was asleep within minutes.

That night, my dream was one that I had not experienced in quite some time. I was surrounded by snow capped mountains. The air on my face was quite cold, but I wasn't shivering. I had the distinct sensation of being surrounded by soft white fur. I also had a sense of purpose. I was there to protect my friends and loved ones. No matter how physically vivid the dream was, that was the real shock to my senses: I had friends and loved ones. I needed them, and they needed me. But it was something more as well. I needed the world, and the world needed me. My tears of joy froze even as they were falling from my cheeks.

Chapter 6

I woke suddenly, to the sound of clinking jars. Will's head poked out from behind one of the dusty shelves. "Sorry Sorch. I was going to let you sleep in a bit longer, but I needed some thyme for the eggs and we're out of it upstairs. Rick is heating some water for a bath, it should be ready by the time we're done eating. See you up there shortly!" The short human headed back up the stairs with a generous bundle of herbs.

"What's a bath?" I asked myself, puzzled.

Later that morning, I discovered that I loved baths.

Will's cooking was quite clever. The nearby butcher ground up the small portions of leftover rabbit meat and sold it inexpensively. Will would fry off the minced meat, and use the grease to cook scrambled chicken eggs. As they cooked he would add the meat back in, as well as herbs and any leftover cheese they had laying around. He served the dish with a few buttered bread crusts that had a nice crunch when you bit into them. I can honestly say it was one of the most delicious meals I've ever tasted. Civilization can produce wonderful things sometimes.

While Will prepared the shop for opening, Rick and I headed across town. We were both dressed in full travelling gear: Hooded cloaks, gloves, and boots. Rick's outfit was forest green, whereas I favored a dark gray. The destination was a hole-in-the-wall inn on the south side of town called 'The Deviated Course'. It rode right on the edge of where the docks met the slums.

The Deviated Course was an adventurer's inn. The bouncers were big and silent, the bartender was big and loud, and the owner was nowhere to be seen unless there was trouble. Two long tables were in the center of the main room, while shadowy booths lined the walls. At this time of the morning, with most of the rowdy crowd sleeping off the aftereffects of their ale in the common room upstairs, only a couple of booths had occupants.

Rick led me over to the job posting board. The writing was in Common, which I had yet to master. My human friend scanned over the postings as the bartender eyed the both of us.

Rick explained, "You're looking for jobs that aren't attractive to a group because the pay is too low to split, but risky enough for a single adventurer so that not anyone off the street could do it. The price should reflect that. Ah, here we are." He read the details, and frowned.

The bartender called over, "Ya need an abacus there, professor?"

Rick continued to read, but answered without looking up, "Shut up Joel."

Joel turned his gaze and his smirk to me. He explained, "I know the professor 'ere since his very first caravan guard job. He pissed 'imself, breaches ta boots. Got the job done in th' end though, so we let 'im live." The bartender flashed a wicked, half-toothless smile.

Rick retorted, "If you didn't water down the beer so much, you wouldn't have so many pissing incidents I imagine."

Joel's smile faded to a scowl. "Bah!" He went back to cleaning the bar with a dirty rag.

I just shook my head.

My human friend turned back to me and summarized what he had read. "There are two options, and

I don't like either of them, but I won't tell you why until you've heard the offers."

He tapped one of the postings and explained, "This one is for a night guard. A warehouse on the docks is expecting trouble this weekend. They don't say which one or what kind of trouble. It **does** have the seal of the mayor on it, so at least the cargo is legal, or legal enough. Anyway, they want an extra body to dissuade a nighttime raid. Two nights, 50 pieces of gold."

I was already shaking my head. "Pass. For all we know, it could be overwhelming odds. There's no clearly defined threat, just mitigation against the unknown. You could get ambushed by all sorts of stuff and things."

Rick agreed, "Exactly what I was thinking." He shifted his finger to the other posting. "This one is about cattle rustling. According to this, an 'unknown creature' is stealing sheep, particularly young adults. One of the farmers putting up the bounty said that it walked on two legs, but was able to carry off a sheep under one arm. It strikes on well lit nights when the moon is close to full. They never found any parts or a blood trail, so it is assumed that the thing's lair is some distance away. They want it killed, and proof of death. 40 gold, and anything you find in its possession is yours."

I nodded. "Yes, that's the one, I'll take that."

Rick looked a little bit taken aback by how certain I was. "Sorch, they don't know what this thing is. It could be a genuine lycanthrope... a werebear or some such creature. All they know is that it's massively strong with a taste for meat."

I shrugged, "But there is no deadline, no penalty for failure, yes?"

The human nodded. "Yes, true. And it's a legitimate offer, bearing the Mayor's seal. But it's also non-exclusive, meaning whoever accomplishes the task first gets the reward."

I laughed, "That's fine. It means I can scout it out, assess the situation, the opponent, and the danger. And if I feel it's too much for me then I can pull out."

Rick considered. "Alright. You've thought this through I see." He called over to Joel, "My friend will make his mark on number forty-one."

The big man grunted and gestured me over. "Come on then. Make yer mark on th' line, thumb print next to that."

I was already stepping over to sign my name, but I hesitated when he mentioned a thumb print. I glanced at Rick, who was already looking back at me.

Surprisingly, it was the bartender who broke the sudden silence, with uncharacteristically quiet words meant only for our ears. "Ye can take off th' glove fer this, sir orc. Gotta good buddy of yer type, boat captain named Blue Briar. Brings me shipments of rum, what he dun drink first."

I nodded, and quickly slipped off the glove covering my right hand. I took up quill and ink, and signed my name in Orcish. I then allowed a couple of drops of ink from the tip of the quill to spatter to the parchment. I pressed my thumb into the black liquid to leave my print.

Joel handed me the bar rag and I wiped my thumb off. I wasn't sure that my digit was any cleaner afterwards, given the state of the cloth. Quickly I slipped my glove back on in order to hide my green flesh once again.

The bartender, back to his normally loud timbre, explained why he needed the thumbprint. "Thanks fer dat. Any mission with th' mayor's seal needs proper trackin'. Disputes go all th' way up ta the

Magistrate ya know. Anyways, happy huntin'."

We hurried out of the tavern, and started to make our way back to the Merchant's Quarter. I mentioned, "I used one on the journey over the hills, but I have three coins left that may give me enough supplies for the trip. Assuming electrum is worth a bit more than half a gold, as the metal content dictates."

Rick frowned as we walked. "We're passing by the provisioner in a few minutes, show me the coins when we get there. This kingdom hasn't minted electrum coins since before the last Great War. The northern half of the continent hasn't used electrum for twice as long as that."

That news surprised me. I had just assumed that they were either coins of the southern kingdoms or the northern desert folk as Shaman had guessed. If they were contraband of some sort, they would need to be melted down first, which would take precious time and resources.

Upon reaching the provisioner's shop, I handed the remaining electrum coins to my human friend.

"Aha!" Rick exclaimed, "This coinage is somewhat uncommon. These were minted in Castle Gray, which means they're at least a couple hundred years old. They usually trade for around two and a half gold each. Will that cover your list?"

I was relieved. I fished out the scrap of parchment that I had written out just before getting dressed this morning. "I believe so. I'll take any change in silver. Thank you, my friend."

With that I waited outside. It didn't take very long, I couldn't afford anything fancy after all. My human companion even helped me to carry the parcels back to the shop using his wonderful Flat Mule spell.

I spent the rest of the day preparing to trade the spell knowledge that we had discussed last night. Should anything happen to me, I wanted to make sure that my new spell would live on. Whenever Rick had a chance throughout the day, he popped down to the stock room and helped me with the translation of my notes. Rick not only spoke my native tongue, he knew the written form fairly well. That made the process much easier.

The next morning, we tackled the exercise of translating a simple spell into Orcish. Painstaking would be one word for it. Painful might be more accurate. Will thought that Detect Magic would be a good candidate. Although I didn't understand every word on sight, the Common alphabet was becoming quite intuitive to me. Still, I leaned heavily on Rick's bilingual talents, so as not to monopolize my friends' time for more than half a day. They had a shop to run, after all.

When I was alone, I finished transcribing the Detect Magic spell into my book. After my midday nap, I even committed the minor spell to memory so that I could try it out. Of course, a magical store room was probably not the wisest place to do so. Everything started glowing! I shielded my eyes and hissed from the sudden brightness. Will ran down to check on me... and then started laughing uncontrollably.

"Oh good gods Sorch, I'm sorry, I should have warned you. But yes, you've got the spell right. Why don't you take a break while this runs its course. You slept through lunch, but we saved a baked potato with chicken gravy for you, and the stove should still be warm enough to reheat it."

I slid my gloves on and walked up the stairs. As I passed through the shop I kept my hood up, bowing my head like a monk. My amulet had a faint glow, as did I from the persistent mystical enhancements, but I was covered up head to toe. The customers didn't take notice. The potato was

simple, but the gravy was very nice: Salty, lemony, and of course chickeny. There were no leftovers.

The next couple of days were much the same, as the full moon approached. My human friends used labels, receipts, and transcripts to help teach me the written version of Common. Once I learned their system, I was even able to help restock the shop.

One older elven woman asked for a consultation as to why her Levitation spell wasn't working correctly. As Rick and Will didn't know that particular spell, they asked me if I would be comfortable helping her out, as she was a friend of theirs. I accepted the challenge, and we proceeded to the back garden for some herbal tea and tutoring.

Although the golden eyed elf was a friend of my companions, and she seemed nice enough, I decided to keep my identity a secret for now. So I kept my hood up and my voice low. She seemed to be quite an advanced student, if the elf's smooth and practiced technique was any indication. It was just this spell in particular giving her problems. We walked through each gesture and intonation slowly. I saw the issue: There were just a couple of minor errors in hand positioning mid way through the casting. I was able to coach her past her mistakes within an hour and a half. She seemed quite pleased afterwards, hovering two feet off the ground. As the old elf departed, I was assured that Rick and Will would be told how competent and friendly I was. I chuckled and wished the woman a good day.

That wasn't the end of my teaching for the week. Both of the humans learned Augmented Intelligence flawlessly, of course. As promised, my own learning took place soon after. Invisible Shield took me the longest to master, but I eventually managed it. By comparison, I picked up Silence from Will fairly easily, and that was supposedly the more difficult spell of the two.

On the final night before my trip, as we were washing and drying the dishes, I confided in my new friends.

"I'm glad we were able to finish trading spells before I left. Should anything happen to me, at least a piece of my magic will live on."

The humans glanced at each other. Rick spoke up first, "It was an honor, Sorch. To create such a work of art in the middle of a swamp under those conditions... simply incredible. And you accomplished that with, I must note, almost no resources to your name, no research staff, and a tiny library."

Will chimed in, "The progression from the basic version to yours is so intuitive. And both sets of notes, simple and arcane, were meticulous. You made it easy for us, truth be told. Students in the future are really going to benefit from your work."

I noted that they didn't downplay the danger of my upcoming mission. They were adventurers themselves, and adventure is dangerous business.

I informed the human duo, "I'm going to try to be back in four days. Maybe allow an extra day for weather. I'll be patrolling out there the night prior, the night of the full moon, and the night after. If I'm not back in five days, I didn't make it. In that case could you get the bartender's friend, the orc captain, to send word to Shaman of the Jeywafa clan? He would want to know."

Will nodded. "We shall do so. On the brighter side, should you be successful we'll have scouted out your potential living space near the docks. We can present you with the most privacy-oriented options on your return."

The rest of the night was spent engaging in idle chatter, making light of things, and drinking cheap

hard cider. That's how adventurers put Death in his place. He would come when he came, but to spend your entire life fearing him is a waste of time. Better to spend whatever time you have on Panos striving to make something of yourself. And whenever possible, do so within the company of your friends.

Chapter 7

After saying goodbye to my friends the next morning, I walked out of the city's east gate. I was heading into the farmlands. My destination was near the foothills that lay a couple of days northeast of Limt. The number of inns and shops that appeared on the side of the road dropped off rapidly after a few hours. Rather than stay on the main road, I switched over to the old cart path that ran parallel. That route kept me further away from any prying eyes. Soon I was walking past fields and copses of trees without another living soul in the vicinity. I traveled day and night, and day once again.

The only oddity that I spotted was a single iron lamp-post on the roadside. I spied the thing late on the first night of travel. There were no apparent structures or people in the surrounding area, and yet a fresh torch burned merrily in the post's glass-shielded sconce. I was a little disturbed, truth be told. Rather than rest nearby, I extended my travel for a half hour until the thing was well out of sight.

It seemed like an eternity before I saw any signs of civilization again. Only at noon on the second day did I pass a simple fruit stand. Soon after I came upon a small community surrounding the local wheat mill. Most of the farmers that I passed had a grim look on their weathered faces. As I crouched by the stream in order to refill my waterskins, I overheard two of the humans talking about the changes that were befalling their lands.

The pudgy farmer with the low pitched voice had been saying, "This water was swelling past the banks ten years ago. Now the current barely turns the mill's waterwheel. What in the hells happened?"

The farmer with filthy overalls replied, "Same thing happenin' all over. Crops gettin' more brown, chickens layin' less eggs. It's the end times, maybe, says my preacher."

The pudgy one snorted, and cast a quick sidelong gaze at my cloaked figure to see if I shared his derision. "Might be the end for us, but I don't think it's that. I think it's targeted. I think some of those new god folk wanna drive us out, and they prayed for this."

Overalls shrugged slowly, "It may be that th' end of days is about old gods fightin' new gods. And in th' fightin' they forget 'bout us. That's why the brown, an' the water issues, an' more sickness. They got their eyes elsewhere."

Pudgy just sighed. He turned to look down at where I was crouching, "If you're hunting the wilds around here, you're probably in for a bad time."

I shook my cloaked head. As I tied the waterskins to my belt and rose to my feet, I replied to the farmer using a soft voice. "No, I'm here to maybe fix at least one of these hardships. I'm hunting a poacher, said to be taking sheep from around these parts."

Pudgy's eyes widened. "Well good on you. I heard about all that."

Overalls piped in, "Godspeed ta ya, young man. Last places hit were jus' northeast o' here. Keep the river on yer left, 'til ya see pinewood fences. Find th' bastard an' break him in two."

I nodded. "Thanks. Fair travels." was my reply. It was a useful bit of intel, and a decent place to start.

The farms in this area were nearly identical. They grew simple things such as potatoes and carrots,

and nearly all of them kept large flocks of sheep. Sheep could be sheared for the wool, and eventually turned into mutton in their older years.

After speaking to a couple of locals, I knew I was in the right place. They were angry, and more than happy to share what information they had to help catch the sheep rustler. Within an hour, I knew every farm that had been hit during the last full moon. The poacher had been targeting younger adult sheep, likely because they were lighter weight and less experienced in evasion than their older kin.

While there was still light, I scoured the low foothills nearby the last couple of thefts. There was no physical sign of disturbance. I went to two of the more easily traveled routes through the foothills and tried to detect any magic in the area... nothing. As the sun died, I mounted the tallest of the foothills in the area, and dug in for the night.

There would be no fire tonight to keep me warm. Fire would give away my location and either scare off the poacher, or worse, make me a target. My cloak would be my mattress, and my new travelling blanket the cocoon that kept the night air at bay. I primarily watched a particular farm. This farm hadn't been hit yet, if the locals were to be believed. A section of fence on the farm's back acre was in disrepair. There seemed to be little or no sign of guard or herding dogs on the property. In short, it was a tasty target.

The bulk of the night passed without incident. I was able to make note of grazing patterns, herd behaviour, and the like. In the final hour of moonlight, just as I was about to take out my rations for a cold dinner of dry fruit, something moved in the hills below me. I schooled my breathing and held perfectly still.

The figure was distant. I could see that it was watching the same farm that I was. It stalked with an eerie precision that denoted at least some intelligence above that of an animal. It acted like something at the top of the food chain, indicated by the fact that it was far more focused on its prey than on looking for tricks or ambushes. This was a hunter, not the hunted.

Nothing happened that night. It watched, I watched it watch. When eventually the creature loped off, dawn was just around the corner.

I headed down to the area where the figure had been. Though I wasn't an expert ranger by any means, certain things were clear. The creature walked upright, at least some of the time. The footprints were heavy in the damp sod. It didn't leave any lasting magical sign in the area. And it had some measure of patience, or at least a ritual or routine that it stuck to.

I followed the tracks back into the foothills, but eventually the trail went cold. At least I had an idea of where it might be coming from. I covered my own trail as best I could, and headed back up to camp. After casting my Augmentation, I laid down to sleep away the morning and early afternoon, wrapped in a dew-covered blanket from head to toe. I would need a long rest in order to memorize my magical arsenal for the next night. I was well prepared for this, pushing the reservoir of my intellect right to the limit of my current power level. This would allow me to prepare and cast a few cantrips, three basic spells, and three more advanced spells without risking permanent damage to my mind. I decided on a purely offensive routine. Once our paths crossed, I had no plans to be subtle.

As the afternoon gave way to night, dark clouds gathered. I was worried... if the night was going to be overcast, perhaps the thief would wait for a more clear and well lit night. I needn't have worried. As with most rain storms these days, it didn't last long. Enough water fell from the sky to tease

thirsty plants and hopeful farmers, but not much more. Within an hour the clouds had retreated.

This time, I didn't have to wait long. The creature was brazen. It approached from exactly the same hill that it had used to scout its prey the night before. The full moon had just crested over the horizon, and it was very likely that some humans were still awake in the farmhouse. Pursuit from the locals could be started in less than ten minutes if this creature was detected.

I waited until the wind shifted, blowing from the slightly pungent fields onto the damp hillsides. Knowing that my own scent couldn't carry to the creature, I quietly made my way closer. It meant losing sight of the thief as I descended from my larger hill and mounted the smaller one that was close to where the creature entered the valley.

A few minutes later, I struggled to spot the interloper. In fact I was struggling to keep myself oriented. A light fog had rolled in due to the cool night air being unable to hold all of the recent moisture. I had this sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. Low visibility, unfamiliar ground, only the scent of cattle in the air... it felt like I had possibly trapped myself. In just a few minutes, nature had turned me from the hunter into the prey.

It had never occurred to me that a sheep might someday save my life. But when the panicked bleating reached my ears, I knew exactly where the danger was. I turned quickly and got my footing on the hillside. At least I would have a fighting chance.

Then again, it had never occurred to me that a sheep might someday try to kill me.

The memory is etched in my mind forever. Out of the mist, it got larger, far too quickly. The fluffy white quadruped, mouth hanging open in a protracted scream. Those four fuzzy limbs flailing for purchase but finding nothing but air. This sheep wasn't charging, it was flying. A fluffy, living boulder. A ruminant missile.

The grazing impact of the sheep's sturdy chest upon my shoulder probably saved it from multiple broken legs, as knocking me down stole much of the fuzzy beast's momentum. Sadly, the impact sent me tumbling down the hillside. I tried to get my bearings: I was near the bottom of the grassy hill, somewhat close to its more rocky neighbor. The conjoining of the two hills formed a natural footpath. I had emerged with just scrapes and bruises, but disoriented as the real threat arrived.

The first tomahawk came in low and flew between my legs even as I stood up. I quickly held up my hand in front of my chest, fingers curled inwards as in if holding something. My incantation finished just in time, as the second and third tomahawks bounced off my Invisible Shield. The creature stalked out of the fog, giving me my first good look at the infamous sheep rustler.

Half-ogres. The offspring of a human male and an ogre female, never the other way around since the size of the child would surely kill a human mother. It is said that this sort of breeding happens during the unholy rituals of some of the old gods. Less frequently, it might be the result of an ogre female capturing a human male and having a bit of fun before dispatching him.

Whatever the circumstances of his birth, this particular half-ogre was holding a massive club in one hand. He was wearing a sheepskin loincloth and not much else. The creature had rage in his hazy yellow eyes.

I quickly backpedaled until I was on the path between the two hills, keeping my Shield up just in case the creature was dumb enough to throw that club. Sadly, he did not. Instead the eight foot tall beast started to circle. He slowly tightened his spiral until he was well within range for a melee assault.

I dodged the first swing, though it was probably a fraction too high to hit my head either way. Using

the half-ogre's recovery time from that off-balanced attack, I reached into my pouch with a free hand. Grabbing a component from one of the little slots inside made me feel a bit more prepared. I just needed him to circle a little bit more.

Sadly, as the half-ogre circled, he also swung. From my right side, the club whistled in at the perfect height, with all of the rage and power that the wielder's species was known for. My Invisible Shield shattered under the impact, and some of the momentum carried the swing through until weathered wood met fragile ribs. My vision flashed white as an unbidden scream was torn from my throat. The pain as well as the energy from the clubbing caused me to stagger a few feet to the left.

Which is exactly where I needed to be.

Now it was my turn to break some ribs. The material that I had palmed remained, as it wasn't for this particular spell. I unleashed my Force Bolt and it struck the half-ogre on the left side. He staggered back, finding himself against the steep, rocky incline of the neighboring hill. Disturbingly, he didn't make a single sound of pain. His counterattack was immediate and vicious, drawing and throwing his final tomahawk in a single underhanded motion. The spinning blade struck my left shoulder a glancing blow. It was mostly a flesh wound, but it started to bleed heavily given how quickly my heart was racing.

Fighting through the pain, casting from one knee, I sent a stream of supernaturally strong webbing flying towards my feral foe. He looked confused for a moment, until he realized that he was trapped up against the steep face of that rocky hill. He let out a frustrated scream. The sound that echoed through the valley was something between the cry of an angry child and the bellow of a wounded buffalo.

The drain on my mind was noticeable now. If I had been at my peak intelligence, I might have headed for higher ground to wage a long war of attrition. But my less intelligent, more angry persona fished out some beetle innards. As the creature tore free of the webs, a volley of green acidic bolts flew from my fingertips. They peppered that broad chest. The sizzling and smoking was horrific.

The wounded thief was quickly free of his bonds. Enraged, he charged my position with that club held aloft. Again, a smarter me would have assessed all of the options available, would have considered a downhill retreat. Bounding down these hills would be easier to navigate on my smaller legs than on my opponent's huge tree trunks. But the less intelligent me had only one thing on his mind:

'Let's do that again.'

The final major spell that I had prepared was the same as the last. This time the acidic bolts sailed in on their target from five paces away. Each impact was a sickening hiss. I thought something had gone wrong for a split second. There was a black spot with a silver glow on the half-ogre's chest that I couldn't account for.

It was only when the creature fell to his knees a scant two paces away from me that I realized the truth. I was seeing the moonlight reflect off of the rocky hill behind my foe. The last Acid Bolt spell had hollowed out his chest, burned out his heart, and left a hole clean through the beast's back.

Every movement brought a fresh wave of pain, but the alternative to moving was not moving and that would eventually mean death. So although everything I would do over the course of the next day would be slow and agonizing, I got on with it.

Tomahawks were gathered, and one was used to cut off the half-ogre's ear as confirmation of the completed bounty. Next, I performed the binding of my wounds as best I could. Finally, I found the creature's trail, and trekked back towards its lair. It was an hour into the foothills before I found what I was looking for... though it must be said that what I found was not what I expected, even in my relatively stupid state.

In a dark nook where three hills met and dropped off, a crude wooden gate and a primitive shelter had been constructed. The thief hadn't been stealing sheep and rams for the meat, at least not directly. He had kept them alive. He was breeding them, in fact! There were pens filled with creatures, the older ones bearing the semi-permanent paint marks of various farms, while the younger ones were unbranded. Clearly the plan was to breed up a significant meat supply with his stolen livestock, sacrificing only grass and water in the process.

As the sheep were unmolested, this was probably a safe place to rest. I took the most comfortable spot within the half-ogre's smelly little lean-to, and slept.

The morning brought with it more pain of course, but more importantly, the opportunity to transition into my intelligence-building spell set. Between enhancements and augmentations, I took inventory of my gains. There was a smattering of silver and copper coins, which would be a welcome resupply for my intelligence enhancement material components. Rations in such a bad state, only a half-ogre could stomach them. A dagger that was actually very fine in quality; something that I would have bought myself prior to this mission if I was flush with funds. And a small cast iron pot in excellent condition. All said, it wasn't much of a haul. Perhaps the extra sheep would yield some gold from one of the ranchers. However it was clear that the main financial gain was going to be the bounty itself.

As a matter of habit, because Shaman would have done it if he were here, I cast a Detect Magic cantrip on the small loot pile.

...and something glowed other than my amulet.

I rubbed my eyes, half thinking I was imagining this. But the glow remained. And the source of the glow was none other than that small cast iron pot, of all things. I examined it for an inscription, and sure enough, something was written on the bottom in letters that shined through the pot's revealed aura. But it was nothing that I could read at the moment.

I strapped my new dagger to my belt, and put everything of value into my new pot. Spirits lifted, I heaped some grass into the pens from a supply that the former resident had collected. They seemed to get the picture, and started to munch away. I left my new charges to their rather bland breakfast. Fighting through the ache in my ribcage, I made my way back to the original camp.

Though it took a few hours longer than a healthy orc would have managed, I packed up my things and then headed down to one of the farms that was named on the bounty. The landowner was suspicious to receive a bulky, hobbling visitor with his face buried in the hood of a cloak. But that suspicion rapidly turned to joy when I told him the good news. He took the ear as proof, and sent one of his daughters on horseback to check on the location of the stolen sheep.

While waiting for confirmation, other local farmers were gathered and they were told that most of their missing livestock were fine. There was both hooting and hollering. Eventually one of the farmers agreed to buy the offspring, which was technically my property as it wasn't covered by the bounty. We settled on a price of five gold and a wagon ride back into town. It was a good price for him, and a welcome mode of transport for this wounded orc.

Eventually the daughter came back, looking quite pale. She dismounted without a word and stared at the gathered men.

After an awkward moment, her father asked, "Well, is it true, they're all up there?"

She nodded, mutely. Then turned her wide eyed gaze on me for some reason.

The farmer's celebrated... more hooting, more hollering. But the father peered curiously at his daughter once again. "What's wrong?"

She cleared her throat and then got up the courage to murmur, "Yonder sir seems to have burned a hole clean through the thief's chest, pa."

There was a moment of silence from the farmers, as all eyes turned on me. I felt suddenly unsafe, and looked up at the nearby horse as a possible escape route.

Then an anonymous voice near the back of the pack of humans said, "Way-hey!"

And the rest of them started cheering once again. Except for the daughter, who wandered inside to find something alcoholic to imbibe.

The farmers happily signed confirmation that the contract was complete, and wished me luck on my journeys. The extra five gold pieces arrived when my ride back into Limt did, and I thanked the young man that handed it to me almost as heartily as the farmers had thanked me. He gave me a shy smile, then said, "Hop in th' back mister, should be nice 'n soft with all th' wool piled up."

With a fully rested team of horses, and no need to stop for investigation, stealth, or resupply, the trip back into town was rapid. We arrived a couple hours after nightfall, and I was dropped off just a single block from The Magic Shop. I bid the lad a good time at market tomorrow and a safe trip back, then I walked the final leg of my round-trip journey.

I threw half a dozen pebbles at the upstairs window before I saw a friendly face peer down at me. In no time at all, my friends were ushering me inside. Rick went to make some tea, while Will admonished me over the state of my body. Begrudgingly, the smaller human admitted that the bandaging job was pretty good, but suggested we see a cleric in the morning.

Rick was returning with a steaming mug when the topic of a cleric came up. "A very good idea Sorch, as you don't want your wounds to fester or heal badly." He handed the drink over. "They'll expect a donation of a few gold for the service however. Which should be alright if your trip was a success?"

I filled them in on all of the details. Of course, they were most excited about the pot.

Will took the cast iron pot over to the front counter as he said, "We really have to teach you the cantrip to read magic inscriptions. Cleverly called: Read Magic. We can have a go in the morning. I have a spare jeweler's loop I can give you. It doesn't get consumed by the spell, so you can use it over and over."

I nodded, then glanced at Rick. He looked like he might be thinking the same thing... Will had far too much energy and enthusiasm for this time of night.

The smaller human cast his spell, then peered at the bottom of the pot through the loop. "Aha! Minotaur scribing. Mmm hmmm. Okay. Sorch, this is a self heating pot. Three times in a day you can touch the handle or the side and say the word 'Blaze'. The pot will heat up as in if over a hot campfire for up to one hour, and then instantly turn itself off. Or you can force it to cool back down

by touching the handle and saying the key word again before the time expires. Cute!”

Rick explained, “These sorts of minor items are made by apprentices who are getting into the crafting magics. In this case, a minotaur likely apprenticing to an elf lord or some such thing. We can sell it for you if you like. After commission you might see thirty gold, maybe more.”

I shook my head, “Oh no, I’m keeping this. It’s amazing!”

They both laughed a little at my enthusiasm. “It is amazing. I’ve seen a skillet like this, but never a pot. Even though it’s minor magic, it still saves a lot of work. I’m glad you like it.” said Will.

Rick rose as I finished my tea. “Come on, I’ll help you to unpack, and then let’s get you to the Temple of Vinara. I see some seepage coming from those bandages, it might not be wise to wait for the morning. It’s a short walk, and they have services up until midnight. Our pastor will fix you up.”

As it turned out, broken ribs were considered a minor healing feat that one of the apprentices could take care of. The suggested donation for the service was ten gold, but only five gold pieces for parishioners, which Will and Rick were. I paid the five gold gladly, and the two humans attended confession as I was worked on.

By the time the brown cassocked young priest was done, my ribs felt much better. Still sore, but moving around and breathing didn’t hurt nearly as much, and I didn’t have to worry about them healing badly. The apprentice priest even re-banded my remaining wounds afterwards for no additional charge. It would be clear to the young cleric what my race was after seeing the flesh of my injured shoulder, but he didn’t seem to mind. “Rick and Will are waiting outside. Walk in grace.” the young man murmured after he was finished.

As I was walking out of the temple, the bishop placed a gentle hand on my good shoulder. He was an older man dressed in crimson robes, wearing spectacles and a mitre. He murmured, softly, “They’re good kids, those two. To bring you in here under the blanket of their membership... that means they think of you as family. I’m glad you have each other.”

Those kind, informative words had an immediate impact on me. I’m sure that the older human could see the tears falling to the floor, sourced from eyes hidden deep in the hood of my cloak. All I could manage, in a gruff tone, was to reply, “I’m glad too. G’night padre.”

My human friends didn’t say a word as I joined them for the walk home. They saw I was emotional, perhaps they thought I had a religious experience. Perhaps, in my own way, I did.

It was the storeroom for me once again, quite the comfort after rainy days and night on the road. As I performed my nightly rituals, I went over my finances in my head. After turning in the contract, I would have forty gold. Twenty five of that was set aside for five weeks of supplies and lodging near the docks, which would take me right up to Will and Rick’s next expedition. A couple of gold to replace some material components and travel rations. One gold to cover the ink I’ve been using here, the least I could do since I was being taught how to cast the Read Magic cantrip in the morning. I would have Rick and Will sell the tomahawks as well, keeping the proceeds to help cover my temporary room and board.

That left 12 gold. 9 for myself, 3 for Shaman.

Well, it was a start.

Chapter 8

My little apartment was right on the waterfront. I had asked Rick if that increased the rental price, but he assured me that it actually brought the weekly rent down! Apparently the nearby fish processing warehouse bothered some tenants. I honestly took very little notice of the smell; it was still better than the fetid rotting of the swamp back home.

I had a view of the ships coming in. Fishing vessels of all sizes regularly visited the docks, of course. But all manner of shipping and pleasure boats made their way through the harbor as well. When I wasn't deep in study or resting, I would absently count the sails or the oars used to drive these naval beasts through the relatively calm waters close to shore. Oftentimes a ship would come in with incredible battle scars. These would sometimes come in the form of broken planks and burnt sails, in the case of piracy. Other times, a ship with a broken mast would limp in, having barely won an encounter with nature itself. Just about every one of them had losses of some sort. And yet, every one of them was beautiful.

Resting and recovering was the plan, at least for my first two weeks back in town. Not only did I need to recover bodily, I needed to recover mentally. The pain took me out of my normal routine. Only in the second week could I really build my mind back up to full potential. Rick and Will were instrumental in helping me to find the road back to full health. Their companionship, their tutelage, and even their cooking contributed to my being made whole.

When I wasn't with my new friends, I was building a foundation in the mystical arts. I wanted to be ready to attend the Arcane University should they accept my application. However there were things that children with magical aptitude learned in their early years. These things... theory, history, ritual... these were gaps in my magical foundation. In order to fill these gaps, I needed books.

But the books I would need were not the same books one would give a human or elven apprentice. I was versed in a different breed of magic. My magic juggled the permanent resources of power and memory with the spendable resource of raw intellect. Humans and elves did not need to worry about their intelligence draining away, nor did their allies nor did their kin. So some of the books that I needed would have to focus on the era when the orcish curse was first weaved. There might even be tomes that tell of the times before the curse, when orc mages walked the land freely and practiced some of the most advanced magic on Panos.

These books could get expensive, even though they didn't contain a single spell. From what Will and Rick told me, they were not in high demand. But in some ways that could be more expensive: Getting these obscure texts shipped or transcribed had a significant price tag. Some of them were even in Orcish, and human scribes who spoke and wrote the language were specialists. Again, not cheap.

We would be leaving on our expedition in the second week of Mid Fall, and I really wanted to place the most important transcription and purchase orders prior to leaving. Luckily, Will had a couple of tasks in mind that would allow me to pay for my small library. A young lord, quite magically advanced for his age, was interested in the Augmented Intelligence spell. However the human lad wished to learn from the person who created the spell. His family was willing to pay for the privilege, and my share would cover almost two thirds of the fees that I would need to pay for my new library.

I had conditions, and if the family didn't agree to all of them, I wouldn't take the job. There was to be no outside observation. My identity was not to be researched or divulged once discovered. The spell

was not to be shared with others without a representative of The Magic Shop screening their suitability. And a Bonding Curse would be cast by Rick upon the student to assure that the terms were kept.

I thought that the family would reject those terms outright, or perhaps come back with a counter offer that I would likely refuse.

Instead, they simply agreed.

And so I found myself in the small walled garden behind the shop, sitting in an old-but-sturdy wooden chair, waiting for my first student outside of the couple hours spent on tutoring Levitation.

I wore no hood, no gloves, nothing to hide the weathered green skin that I would normally obfuscate. If the boy wanted to know where this spell came from, he would find out. Besides, with the Bonding Curse in place, he wouldn't be telling anyone about my true origins.

The young man strode into the garden with the bearing of a confident lord. But his stride broke noticeably upon regarding my visage. Fine. Let him look, let it sink in. To his credit, the teenager may have slowed but he didn't stop. He took the chair opposite me, gaze never leaving my face. "You are the creator of the spell, sir?" the raven haired lad asked, quietly.

"I am. Though I'm not a 'sir' by any measure. You can call me Sorch." I offered a hand to shake.

When the noble son took my hand, I was amused by the contrast. His hand was small and pale, like soft ivory. Mine was calloused, pitted, the color of moss. We shook and then I leaned back in my seat to regard my young charge. "You're young lord Leeson yes, aged sixteen? And attending the youth Academy?"

He nodded quickly. Easy questions were just what he needed right now. "Yes si... Sorch. I should be going into the full University program in a year, if I pass the entry criteria."

I raised a brow. The young man squirmed a little in his seat as I regarded him. "What's that, two years early? You must be hell on your teachers."

That actually made him smile a bit. "So I'm told, though I do try to remain respectful at all times."

I nodded. "I'm certain that's true Leeson. Well, for the next week at least, I want you to speak your mind. We need to be efficient about this, so there's no room for lizard crap. Agreed?"

He blinked a couple of times at the phrase 'lizard crap', probably more used to the bovine reference. But eventually his little head was nodding. "Yes, agreed, of course. I'll provide the kind of feedback that will be helpful in the learning process."

I snorted. "You're family is in politics, I can tell. It's that careful wording, erring on the side of kindness, but also just slightly... generic. There's no need for that. I can tell you have questions, ask them plainly. I'll do my best to answer them."

I had barely finished my sentence, and the young man was already leaning forward and blurting out, "When did you get transformed into an orc? Was it a magical duel?"

I laughed, the sound echoing back at the both of us in the tight confines of the garden. "I was transformed into an orc at birth. Right. I guess it's story time."

In fact, the entirety of that first session was Leeson asking questions about orcs. But in a constructive way that I had to applaud. Much like I needed to understand the framework of human and elven

magic, the young lord wanted to know about how magic worked amongst the orcs. And of course he particularly wanted to know about my experiences and history. All of it was recorded as a preamble in his spellbook. That was clever, since personal notes were not forbidden by the terms of the agreement, so long as he didn't intentionally show them to others.

I had to admit, it felt good. It felt good to be able to speak about my time and my trials without censoring myself. My student would be bound by the terms of the agreement, but even if he wasn't, I would have told him these things. He was polite and inquisitive and projected an aura of trustworthiness. The young lord had insisted on learning from the spell's creator, but likely hadn't dreamed that the learning would be of such an alien nature. Leeson was more than happy to spend the session reviewing the magical ways of the Jeywafa clan and my own path towards enlightenment.

We talked through our light lunch of bread, walnuts, and cheese. By the time I had caught him up to the modern day, the sun was starting to set behind the garden wall. He had already added several pages of background to his spellbook. It was possibly the most complete account of modern orc sorcery written in Common. "That's all for today. Tomorrow we'll get into the material component of silver and why it was chosen. I'll perform the first casting, and we'll start to break down the words and the gestures as well."

Leeson sprinkled some fine sand on the fresh ink, then blew off the excess. He started to pack up his study materials. "Thank you Sorch. When I came here today I thought... well, I never thought it would be anything like this!" He sounded pleased. This was probably the most exciting thing that his education had ever exposed him to.

I tilted my head. "You know what? Neither did I. Not sure what I expected to be honest. But this wasn't painful at all."

The young lord laughed at that. "I think you'd make a great teacher, if you chose to pursue it full time." He paused and then amended his statement. "Well, in the right group. With open minded students."

I snorted, and then waved him off. "Good night young man."

Will and Rick were eager to hear about how the first session went. After I assured them that there would be no angry noble family demanding a refund, we sat down to dinner. They insisted that it was the least they could do to earn their share of the commission. I agreed, and proceeded to make half of a roasted chicken disappear.

The next day, I found myself cutting my morning studies short. I was eager to get back to tutoring. So much so that I showed up at The Magic Shop half an hour early. Unsurprisingly, so had my young charge. I put a big gloved hand on his shoulder, and wordlessly led him into the back garden.

Once I had shucked my cloak and gloves, and once Leeson had set up his writing paraphernalia, we began. We started by discussing silver as a component. After talking about elemental rarity and the value of a sacrifice within the realm of magic, we discussed progression.

I explained, "Frankly, using silver was just easier. I was basing a spell upon another spell. What was I hoping to accomplish? I wanted a larger effect. So the material component could, in theory, be a more valuable or more rare version of the original."

Leeson nodded, slowly. "But wasn't there a risk of simply... going too big? A risk of burning the candle too brightly?"

I considered how to phrase my methodology in the Common tongue. Finally I settled on a plumbing metaphor. "There would be, yes, if I had kept the entirety of the first spell's framework. Imagine that the first spell used the structure of a moonshine distillery."

I paused to make sure that he understood the context. From his slightly guilty look, I knew that he had.

I continued, "The pipes used to heat the liquids and carry the steam are small, narrow. Good enough for that purpose, but not for a more grand task. I replaced that structure with that of, to use a real world example, a hand pump for a well. The effort to produce a result is greater, because more volume needs to be moved and larger pipes are being used. But the result itself is also greater. And that's what I did with the spell. I retooled the framework, upgraded it so that it could handle the volume of power and the greater sacrifice of silver over copper."

The noble lad nodded, scribbling furiously in his spellbook.

I took out a bit of silver. "This is the minimum amount of silver that you need. This piece was part of a set of coins that I had a blacksmith heat up and fracture as he was waiting for his forge to reach iron handling temperature. Even if it cost me a few silver for his time, the process doubled my supply, adding weeks to my regular routine. Always use the minimum when possible. Waste not, want not."

The black haired teen chuckled a bit. "You don't have to convince me. My father tracks every piece of copper. Not that he isn't generous mind you. And clearly he'll pay top gold for services that he thinks are worthwhile, such as your own. But the concept of 'waste' is something he doesn't abide by."

I smiled and nodded. I had learned not to show as many teeth when I smiled around Leeson, as a more toothy grin seemed to turn him a shade paler than he was already. "Good. Well, you understand the component, now let me show you the spell itself. We'll go through each part individually in the next few days, so just pay attention to the whole process right now."

He set aside his writing materials. If he leaned forward with any more enthusiasm, he would fall right out of his chair.

Casting the spell was second nature to me now. It was like breathing. I hardly felt the silver slip from this plane of existence into the next. I did feel the mental rush, followed by the lesser mental drain. Oh how I envied Leeson in some ways. He would never feel the drain, not until the spell was over. The Augmentation would work even better for him than it did for me, the mage who created it.

I opened my eyes to see those brown eyes peering back at me. He said, "For a moment, it was as if you were in your own world."

I nodded. "For a moment, I was."

We discussed some of the linguistic differences between my 'brand' of magic and what the lad was used to. I assured him that it wouldn't be difficult, and that Will and Rick had mastered the spell using traditional incantation methods.

I did have a racially specific footnote for the young man, "After seeing my human friends cast the spell, I should note that it makes those of the smaller races quite tired. As you know, the copper version of the spell is a physical drain, like recovering after running a short sprint. My version of the spell hits you like you've been running for a couple of miles. For someone with orcish constitution, that isn't much of a problem. But Rick and Will needed an extended sit down after the casting. I

wouldn't attempt it if you're already tired or physically exerted."

There was a knock on the door leading into the walled garden. "Ah, right. As a surprise, your mother apparently sent some less humble fare for lunch. Something called 'brisket' I believe?"

That's when I discovered that I loved brisket.

As I cleaned my plate with a piece of soft bread, the teenager asked, "Now that you've been here, and seen more of the world, and tried these new things... would you ever go back to your home?"

The answer was out of my lips before I could even think about the ramifications. "No."

I paused, then clarified, "No I wouldn't go back in any permanent way. I have a dear friend there by the name of Shaman, and I miss him. I do plan to go back and see him. I do plan to improve the life of my clan however I can. But that life isn't one that I can go back to."

The lad nodded. I finished my bread and started to stack plates and cups as the young human finished his meal. All the while, I reflected on the force and certainty of my initial answer. That 'no' was guttural, instinctive. I didn't even know that I felt that strongly until the young man asked.

Technical drills took up the rest of the second day and the entire third day of Leeson's tutoring. Finger positions, rote memorization of the incantation, copying the spell into his book. The young lord was a technical genius, and in some ways I improved my own technique while adapting the spell to his particular methods.

It was clear that Leeson was moving from strength to strength. His mind was agile, as were his fingers. His voice was strong, as was his will. Having worked with him for just three days, I understood. I understood why he was two years ahead of his classes. I understood why he had such a passion for magic. And I understood why he wanted to go right to the source when learning this new spell: He would undoubtedly create some of his own one day.

Which made the fourth day even more of a mystery to me.

Try as he might, even understanding each component of the spell individually, the young lord couldn't seem to cast the spell. The silver sacrifice stayed in his hand. There was no sensation of inspiration, no hint of mental enhancement. He watched me perform the spell twice more, but that only seemed to fuel his frustration. After countless attempts, I called it a day. To the lad's credit, he wasn't angry with me, but he was clearly angry at himself.

I discussed the situation with Rick and Will at dinner that night.

"He's brilliant. He understands all of the concepts. It **looks** like he's doing everything correctly. And then nothing happens."

Will shrugged. "Maybe he isn't ready for that level of power yet? We didn't really check into his mastery levels. We were told second hand that he had a grasp of some of the advanced techniques, but didn't personally observe them."

Rick asided to Will, "Mary Johanson said that he had mastered some second year spells, so the raw power should be present." The taller human absently sprinkled salt over his baked potato. "It's difficult to know what's in a student's mind when they're casting a spell. A mental distraction or aberration is more than enough to stop a spell from working."

I latched onto that theory. "What do you mean?"

Rick shrugged, "I mean... Will, what was it that Arcanist Vodin said about preparing your mind for elemental spells?"

The smaller human looked like he was deep in thought for a few seconds. Then he recalled, "Oh right. When you're casting fire magic, you need to be aware of your intentions. Even the thought of water, or ice, or moisture could cause the spell to fizzle. He called it 'subjective clarity'. Does that help you, Sorch?"

My mind was racing. "Rick, when you use the spell, what's in your mind?"

He hesitated, but I insisted, "Be honest, I won't be insulted."

Finally the human answered, "Money. I mean it's a fine spell Sorch, but not one that I would personally use every day. It takes away from the volume of spells that I can cast and the benefit to me personally is questionable unless I have some kind of intensive study session I would need to attend."

I turned my gaze to Will, but he was already nodding. "Profit, yes, same here."

I murmured to myself, "And for me it's... advancement. Knowledge. Power."

We ate in silence for a little while. Finally Rick asked, "Do you think you know what's happening then, Sorch?"

"I think I might. If you'll excuse me, I need to head home immediately after dinner. There's something I need to look up."

I burned the midnight oil. Not to read some obscure text, but to review my own notes. Particularly the diary entries that I had made just after I got the spell to work in the first place. Suddenly it all fell into place. I had discovered the missing element that would make a spell work for a poor orc and a couple of shopkeepers, but not a privileged and intelligent young man.

I walked into our fifth and final tutorial session with confidence. Leeson was slouched in his seat, looking a bit defeated. We couldn't be more different in that moment. It was time to bring the lad down to my level.

"So after reviewing my notes, I believe I know why the spell isn't working for you, Leeson."

He glanced up at me, daring to have a little bit of hope. "Yes?"

"It's because you're a ponce."

For a lad so pale, who knew that he could summon so much blood to his cheeks?

"Excuse me?!" the teenager sputtered, clearly angry.

I yawned. "You know, a fop. A dandy. A hairdo."

Leeson stood up, fists clenched. "How **dare** you? You know nothing about me!"

A toothy smirk was my reply. But I added, for good measure, "I know that this spell requires something that you don't have. Need. It requires you to need something, and to have the ambition and the desire to reach out and grab it. You don't **need** anything. You can just send out a servant for whatever you want. Or you can ask mommy and daddy."

The young noble was shaking with rage. "I have ambition! What in the hells do you know anyway,

you glorified swamp rat? I've earned my place in the world of magic, nothing was handed to me!"

I shouted right back at him, this time hurling a piece of silver at him, which he caught deftly. "Then cast the damned spell, boy, or quit wasting my time!"

And he did.

That transformation from angry young man prior to casting the spell, to consummate magician during the casting, to beatific cherub as he basked in the intellectual rush of Augmented Intelligence... it was a beautiful thing to watch.

"Oh!" was all he said afterwards, eyes unfocused as he coped with this new sensation.

I was grinning ear to ear. As he adjusted to the augmentation, I explained. "The missing element was drive, Leeson. We were treating this like a technical exercise. And technically you were doing all of the right stuff and things. But when I cast the spell, it's my lifesblood. When Rick and Will cast the spell, it's about their livelihood. The spell has to be an expression of genuine need, genuine desire. Your desire to advance in the world of magic and be independent are excellent examples. I'm going to update my notes and have the lads update theirs as well."

He took a few deep breaths. The red in his cheeks was no longer anger, it was shame. "Sorch, I didn't mean what I said about being a swamp rat, I do apologise. I was just..."

I waved the apology off. "You were angry, and I made you angry, and that was intentional and entirely my own doing. It should be noted that you are not in any way a ponce or a fop, you're a remarkable young man. Just look what you've achieved. You're the first outside my circle of friends to cast this spell."

Now it was Leeson's turn to smile. "I had a good teacher."

"Yes well, let's not pack up the wagon just yet. We'll spend the rest of the day deconstructing the spell, you can have a nap after lunch so that you're ready to memorize it again, and we'll make sure that you can summon that desire into your mind in a less stressful circumstance."

After the rush of being able to cast the spell wore off, Leeson needed to sit down. I wasn't exaggerating when I outlined the after-effects of Augmented Intelligence on humans. The young man looked like he had been lifting heavy weights all morning. I filled the next hour of tutoring time by giving the lad a verbal critique of his performance. That allowed him to get his wind back. After lunch and a brief period of sleep, we both memorized our spells once again.

As I predicted, the young noble was able to recast the spell after a good rest. His technique was, if anything, better than my own. We both made some final notes, and started to pack up for the day. But before he went away to partake in his family's weekend activities, I had a little surprise to spring upon him. The sun was setting over Limt as I unwrapped our little treat and showed the human.

"A-are you sure this is alright?" the lad stammered, looking at the glass of port wine that had been poured in his honor.

I snorted. "Asks the lad who quite clearly knows a thing or two about distilling white lightning." I took a sip from my own glass. My eyes slowly closed in visceral pleasure, as the heat of the alcohol and the wonderful fruity tang washed over my senses. "Besides, it had better be alright. Your father sent the bottle."

He chuckled. "Oh! Alright then." The raven haired lad raised his glass silently to toast his father from

halfway across town. Then he too imbibed, and melted in his seat as the powerful port washed over him. "Oh, this is from the old cellar."

I nodded. It was the best wine I had ever tasted, though admittedly I didn't have a lot to compare it to. "So what's next for you Leeson?"

He licked his lips before taking another long sip. "In a couple of weeks I'm taking my finals. The Youth Magic exams. They determine a lot of things, one of them being possible placement at the Arcane University. I'll be putting your spell to good use as I study."

I raised an eyebrow. "Ah, so the timing of this was quite deliberate. I'm glad it worked out for you. Best of luck on your tests."

He chuckled a bit. "I just... I want to get in. I don't want to wait another year. I'm ready." He glanced up from his glass to look me in the eye. "What's next for you, Sorch?"

I let another portion of the lovely quaff roll over my tongue and down my throat before I answered the young man. "I'm going to be a caravan guard and then I'll be participating in Will and Rick's northern expedition. Departure is only a couple of weeks away now."

Leeson raised his glass to me, and I to him. We finished our victory drink in silence, both of us already thinking ahead to the next big chapter in our lives.

Chapter 9

The bishop, garbed in a red short sleeved knit vest and matching silk pants, jotted down some notes in a neat, tight script. "And you said you'd prefer the first edition of 'The Start of Things to Come', correct?"

I nodded. "If that's possible. I have to stay within my budget of course, so the second edition will have to do if access to the first will be expensive."

The leader of the Temple of Vinara nodded his understanding. "We'll treat your money as a single pool so as not to go over budget, don't worry about that young man. All fees, including our commission, will be accounted for in advance." He puffed out his chest a bit, "And given my legendary powers of negotiation, I believe you can expect at least half a dozen of the high priority items on your list."

I chuckled softly. "I leave the matter in your more than capable hands, padre. Will and Rick send their regards." I bowed, travel cloak rustling.

The older clergyman returned the bow. "Kind of you to relay that, Sorch. May Vinara bless you and keep you all, and may your upcoming journey be a great success."

I left the temple with a spring in my step. The next three weeks would be an adventure unlike any that I had experienced in my life. It was more than a trip into the mountains. It was an outing with my new friends and companions. They showed me their trust twice over: Using their influence to get me hired on as a fellow caravan guard, and signing me on as a junior partner on their subsequent mountain expedition near the city of Ice House.

This meant that I would achieve short term stability in my financial situation. The 60 gold that the caravan job paid would easily cover my rent on the dockside apartment for the duration of our trip. I had the caravan company pay the fee directly to my landlord. Given his rather colorful nature, I made sure to get the receipt in writing.

The potential profits from the expedition were, of course, unknown. The nature of exploration and adventure is risk, and the reward is never certain. On average, the guys said that their share of the proceeds topped a thousand gold pieces worth of merchandise that they could resell in The Magic Shop. On this trip, the profits would be split nine ways, with each of the senior partners getting two shares, and myself getting one. So if all went well, and this was an average trip, I could end up with at least a couple of hundred gold pieces. Not bad for a month on the road.

As numbers and ambitions danced through my head, I made my way to the northern tip of Limt. The north gate out of the city was affectionately known as Adventure Alley. The reason was clear. The eastern and western gates into Limt carried day to day caravan traffic; just normal shipping throughout the territory and up and down the coast. You know... boring stuff and things. The northern gate was only used for longer and more dangerous journeys. The road only led to Ice House, which was both an adventuring hub and the gateway to the northern continent. Thus: Adventure Alley.

Outside of the north gate was a collection of large compounds, each one belonging to one of the major caravan companies. Their services were not cheap. Most grains, cotton, certain kinds of vegetables, and the vast majority of fish had to be shipped into Ice House. So the cost of living, as one might imagine, was quite high. These caravan companies profited from the shipping of scarcities

into Ice House, trade and messaging between the northern and southern continents, and shipping spoils of the adventure trade back to the southern cities. They could also take advantage of price differences between Ice House and Limt, if they had spare capacity. For example, fish was far easier to catch in the ocean than in the occasional unfrozen stream or underwater lake found in the mountains. Quickly packed and salted, the relatively cheap commodity could be sent to Ice House at a severe markup. And once they arrived, the naturally frozen state of things near Ice House made storage of fish and meat a trivial thing.

I was particularly excited to be meeting one of the other full partners on the expedition. Apparently, Rick and Will knew this partner from the Arcane University, even though he wasn't a mage. They seemed to delight in telling me absolutely nothing about this man, simply informing me that it would be worth the wait to find out about him in person. I played along, not wanting to be a spoilsport.

The fourth and final full partner, I would apparently rendezvous with up in Ice House. The guys were being even more mysterious about our final adventuring companion. They didn't take any satisfaction in that particular vagueness, however. Will and Rick genuinely didn't know much about the personal life and history of the final partner, outside of their talents and their reliability.

I made my way to the compound of Advanced Scouting and Commerce, the particular caravan company that we would be working for and travelling with on this trip. The wooden sign hanging from the administrative building, which I was able to read quite easily given my improved Common, said: 'Need something? Just A.S.C.' I groaned softly at the pun.

Rather than walk into the office to inquire about my companions, my gaze was drawn deeper into the compound by a series of hoots and whistles. Two conspicuous humans were waving frantically in my direction. The smaller man was even jumping up and down, as in if it were possible to miss Rick and Will making such a racket. I walked over to them, dodging porters and caravan managers as they finished securing cargo across the two dozen horse drawn wagons.

Rick gave me a handshake, and Will gave me a surprise hug. I was still getting used to friendly physical affection. It was unheard of in my tribe and in any tribe I had ever had dealings with. I discovered that it made Will smile when I thumped him on the back and squeezed his shoulder. For a moment I pondered what would happen if I tried to hug Shaman as a casual greeting. He would probably have Lizzy bite me.

Greetings done, Rick excused himself so that he could supervise loading The Magic Shop's own cargo. Will mentioned, "Our guard duty pays for the transport of two large trunks. So we take orders from merchants in Ice House, due for delivery every other season. It pays for the help that we hire to keep the shop running while we're away, and most of the expedition's expenses. I'm going to square away the invoices, so feel free to... oh hey! You should meet Toby, our partner. He's in the second tent to the left, just over there."

I glanced over to where the small human was pointing. "It would be my pleasure." I started to head towards the tent in question.

"Oh Sorch!"

I paused, "Yes Will?"

"Ummm, don't freak out. Okay?"

I paused to reply, "Of course not." Then I headed over to the tall, dusty tent. I might not be worldly like my new friends, but I could certainly stay composed when meeting a business partner. I opened

the tent flap and stepped inside. I mean, did Will think I was some sort of hi-

“Holy lizard crap!”

The words fell from my lips before I could restrain myself. Even with Will’s warning, I was ill prepared. Toby was... there was no other way to describe him. Toby was a minotaur. A bull man, standing my height and half my height again. He towered over me. Golden brown fur covered the parts of the great beast’s body that were not covered by chainmail and leather. He wore no boots at the moment, preferring to allow his well groomed hooves to meet the ground unshod. Thick black horns curled above the minotaur’s alertly perked ears.

But what really surprised me was that jovial, booming laughter.

“Holy lizard crap indeed. If my nose does not fail me, I smell an orc! That’s amazing. Rick said that I would be surprised by our new junior partner, and he was right. Step into the lamp light please, and let me see you without the silly hood up.”

It was like Toby’s voice penetrated my skin and shook my very bones. It wasn’t just the volume, it was also the baritone timbre of the bull-man’s voice. Despite this, I felt oddly at ease. He seemed to be in an excellent mood. One might even say he was jolly.

I removed my hood and my gloves, “Pardon my outburst sir, I haven’t ever met one of your kind. If I might say so sir, you are a physically impressive specimen.” As I had been asked, I stepped into the lamp light so that it illuminated my green hued skin.

Toby grinned. His teeth were perfectly white and perfectly square, the picture of perfect dental hygiene. “You are always allowed to speak the truth in my presence, Sorch the orc! I encourage it. In my case, I have met others of your kind. I’ve met orcs in both neutral and adversarial situations. But I’m happy to have the chance to ally with such a well spoken representative of the species.”

I’m not sure why, but something about the minotaur’s tone made me believe that his words went beyond flattery. The sincere compliment brought a slight flush to my cheeks. I stammered and managed a subdued murmur of thanks.

The minotaur reached into his pack and produced a sky blue tabard. He slid the piece of cloth over his head. When it came to rest, I saw the religious symbols. Thanks to my recent studies, I was able to put two and two together.

“You’re a paladin.” I murmured in disbelief.

The large bull man flashed me a bright smile. “Indeed I am, aren’t you so very observant? Aro-Remset be praised. I will tell you all about myself on the trip, if you would do me the courtesy of doing the same. Time on the road can be long without tales told and souls bared.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to swap tales with you.” I said without hesitation. I’m not certain if it was his enthusiasm, or his upbeat demeanour, or simply the novelty of the situation... but being around Toby simply felt good. It helped that the huge creature was instantly accepting of me. I had heard tales that a paladin could see into your heart if he wished, and find any evil intent. If that held true, whatever he saw in my heart didn’t upset him at all. I suppose that was a relief even to myself.

Just then, there was a powerful cry from outside, “All gather! Instructions from the caravan master!”

The minotaur untied the peace knot on his massive broadsword, slung his backpack, and hefted his shield. “It’s time.” was all he said before leading the way out of the tent. I pulled up my hood,

donned my gloves, and followed.

The caravan master was a short, balding man who looked like he had seen all manner of businessman, adventurer, and monster that this world had to throw at him... and he didn't care for any of them. Wearing a permanent scowl, the salt and pepper bearded gent could be seen pacing in front of the lead wagon. When he figured everyone was here, he started to bellow.

"We have a few new people on this trip, so listen up! I'm saying this once, then I expect you to do your damned job. In the rear wagon, we've left space for our two archers. They got pointy ears, you can't really miss them. The two middle wagons have our complement of front line fighters, so if we circle the wagons in an emergency, one of you drops out every couple of seconds so we have decent coverage all 'round. In the second wagon, we have our three mages, protected by this large piece of beef with horns."

I glanced around. I spotted the two elves, keeping to themselves near the very back of the gathering. The fighters were mostly in heavy leathers or light chainmail. All of them had swords or axes, and a couple of them also had wicked looking crossbows. They were a fairly well equipped crew.

The caravan master continued. "If **anyone** sees anything fishy, you should shout out 'Danger' and the direction. The more eyes we got on it, the quicker we figure out what it is. Do your shouting in Common, 'cuz I don't speak Entish. If anyone gets hurt, and that means guards or civies, medical supplies are in the center wagon. One of our non-combatants, Sister Janet, will try to make you not die. If you die we'll drop your body and all of your crap off at the endpoint designated in your contract. Questions?"

Rick called out, "Miles, what's the loot protocol for anything stupid enough to be killed by us?"

The man nodded curtly, "If we're running, leave all of their crap behind and get your asses back to your wagons. If we've stopped, drag everything into one big pile. I'll manage the loot order, and arrange for the bodies to be burnt. Anything left that I think I can sell, I'll buy at wholesale discount and you idiots split the proceeds. Everything else burns. Other questions?"

There were no other questions.

The caravan master, called Miles (or so Rick had mentioned), waved his hand dismissively at us, and then ambled off to sign some papers. His assistant had been waving the documents at him urgently at the end of his 'inspirational' speech. I assumed they were things that needed to get done before the important company member disappeared for several weeks.

I followed Will and Rick's lead, as did Toby who ambled behind us at an easy gait. First we stopped by one of the supply wagons to get our day's rations and water. Will mentioned, "When we stop for the night, the company appreciates any foraging or hunting you can do. Mostly because people get sick of the same dried fruit and jerky over and over again. With twenty five wagons, there's a lot of mouths to feed. With thirteen guards, just as many non-combatants if not more, and over twice as many crew, you're looking at over seventy people on this trip. Not to mention a hundred or so horses. You can't split a stag seventy ways, but if everyone does their part we'll be in good shape when the lean section of the journey hits."

As we all climbed up into the back of our wagon, which had already been loaded with our gear and The Magic Shop's shipment, Rick said, "When we approach the middle part of the journey, everything gets scarce. It's the 'dead zone' between the ruins of Castle Gray and the mountains. There are only a few safe watering holes, and not much grazing for the horses. The fewer supplies we can use before we hit the snow, the better. After that, there's plenty of snow to melt for water,

and a fair amount of hunting and trapping can be done.”

When Toby got aboard, there was a noticeable creaking. We all held our breath until the big man-bull had settled in. He glanced over at the three of us. “Oh come on, when was the last time I broke a wagon?” He added quickly, “By accident?”

Will’s smart-ass reply was cut short by the wise clarification from our bovine companion. I chuckled. There was a story there, which I would have to ask about when the time was right.

The first couple of days on the road were uneventful. I was quickly learning what it meant to be part of a caravan. By necessity, one had to be a jack of all trades as well as the master of at least one. Just because I was one of the hired guards, I wasn’t excused from menial labor. Whenever the wagons were stopped, I was expected to participate in vehicle inspection, livestock feeding, fire building, hunting and gathering, and all manner of small chores. In a way, that was good for me. It made me feel connected to the overall endeavor. I was part of a team.

While travelling those first few days, I satisfied Toby’s curiosity about my background. He wanted detailed knowledge about ‘being an orc’, from life in a tribe or clan, to diet, to work habits, to warfare. I answered every question to the best of my ability. Even Rick and Will learned a few new things about me and my clan. By midday of the third day, I had finally run the paladin out of questions. When he announced that his curiosity was satisfied, there was a sarcastic round of applause from the two humans. I told Toby that he could expect to be grilled when we bedded down for the night. The minotaur assured me that when his turn came for answering questions, he would do so with equal verbosity and candor.

The hunting and foraging was particularly good that night. Our elven rear guard had caught two stags, there were a number of rabbits caught by the warriors, and our group managed to find a hillside that had dozens of wild potatoes. When the caravan master wandered by, he said it was the finest haul that he’d seen in the last year. As he was walking away, he noted that the road quickly became desolate from this point on, and not to get used to such a bounty.

Will stared daggers at the back of Miles’ head. “He’s always good for a laugh, isn’t he?” the small mage asked, acidically.

Rick patted his partner on the back. “Ignore him. He’s a good guy, but if he didn’t look for the downside of things, he probably wouldn’t have a business left. That’s just his nature.”

With the contributions of the staff and the civilians, from wild berries to roasted squirrels, everyone ate well. Sister Janet blessed the feast and delivered a little speech about the importance of community. There was genuine applause afterwards. Rick murmured in my ear, “Sister Janet has been a part of well over a hundred of these caravan trips. The regulars know her better than their own family.” I looked at the older human’s weathered face. It was a roadmap of the world: Wrinkles, scars, and leathery patches from being out in the sun far too often. But under all of that was an undeniable joy. It was something I would like some day... that sense of community, of caring for something greater than yourself and your little circle of friends. Someday.

Our group broke away from the main campfire to relax after the big meal. I took out my self-heating pot and filled it with some water. I could brew some strong tea and keep the four of us nice and warm at the same time. Once the brewing process was underway, Toby broke the silence.

The minotaur said, “So Sorch, you’ve had all day to think of questions for me. What would you like to start with?”

My answer was immediate, "Could you tell me about the Elf-lands?" Will and Rick murmured their approval, it was a topic that they enjoyed.

Toby nodded. He leaned back against a wagon wheel and stretched his legs, hooves digging slight furrows into the dirt. "Of course. There are two major elf nations. Civilia is where I hail from. Past the mountains and far to the northwest, Civilia is said to be the birthplace of magic on Panos. I believe it. The structures are drawn directly from the earth by magic; great crystalline towers and obsidian bridges. Right near your homeland, Sorch, is the nation of Arbitros. The elf folk of the southeast are practitioners of more wild sorcery, and tend to make their homes high in the branches of the trees themselves. I've had the pleasure of spending time in both places. Civilia is ancient, traditional, and organised. Arbitros is more chaotic, and in a constant cycle of rebirth."

The beast-man described at length the similarities and differences between the two elven nation-cities. Civilia was ruled by a royal family, while Arbitros had an elected council that left power every three years and could never serve again afterwards. Civilia had a fiefdom, while there was no concept of land ownership at all in Arbitros. Both elven nations had armed forces. Civilia had a professional standing army, while all adults in Arbitros were expected to serve in the militia for nine years, some time between the ages of one hundred-ten and one hundred-forty.

By the time Toby was finished, we had been through two rounds of tea. Other groups were turning in for the night, and that seemed like a good idea to us as well. Before getting in our bedrolls, the minotaur asked me, "So what will the topic of conversation be tomorrow?"

I simply answered, "You."

The morning was cooler than the one before, perhaps an indication of what we could expect further up the road. After helping the caravan workers to feed and water the horses, we went to our prospective wagons and set off. I decided to start the Q&A session soon after we had arranged ourselves in the second wagon.

"So Toby, what exactly is a minotaur? Where did they originate?"

Toby took out an armor polishing cloth and started to buff out his thick black horns as he spoke. "In ages past, just after the creation of elves, humans, and orcs, the gods of justice and light heard a cry. Looking down upon what they had created, they saw a group of elves all standing in a circle."

'Why do you cry out for justice?' asked Aro-Remset, the elven god of fair battle.

'The orcs and humans prepare to wage war, and yet we are not ready. For each of our generations, they have four to five! They breed and they make engines of war, and yet we have not had time to learn the ways of destructive magics. Is this just?'

Toby was doing the high pitched little voices for the elves, much to our amusement. He switched back to his own baritone timbre in order to explain, "Aro-Remset did not find this just. In those early days the elves, mature at age one hundred instead of eighteen like the other races, were few in number. He decided that a deterrent was in order, to allow for the fair development of the elf nation."

'Behold the bulls in the field. They are brave. And though they prefer peace, they are ready to serve in times of war. Bulls, I command you, rise up and protect my people until they are plentiful and battle-ready!'

The minotaur wiggled his fingers. "And so the minotaurs were born. Not as numerous as the major races, but able to be a force in combat from a young age... well, young relative to an elf. Thus, our

age-long bond with the elven people. We provided protection in their time of need, and would again if the need arose. They treat us with respect and kindness. Should any minotaur be poor or outcast, they are welcome in any of the elven lands, where they will be fed and groomed and well cared for.”

As the morning stretched towards noon, Toby related the role of minotaurs in history. Their participation in the two great wars, their presence at the fall of Poth in the northeastern desert, and their aid in the building of the Arcane University to name a few. It seemed that minotaurs liked to be wherever there was action.

As we broke for lunch, I agreed to allow Toby to rest his voice. He could pick up where he had left off tonight after dinner... so long as Will and Rick entertained us during the afternoon leg of today’s journey. They agreed, and together they recalled the most interesting customers that they had encountered in their shop since they last saw Toby.

As our day’s journey drew to an end and the sun was dipping past the horizon, one of the humans’ stories was of particular interest to Toby. His ears perked visibly as Will told the tale.

“Oh yes, we saw another minotaur in our shop recently. She was dressed mostly in leathers, with some kind of cudgel on her hip, peace-knotted of course. She came in asking about divine magic. I showed her what we had in stock. We sometimes have healing potions, abjuration scrolls, and the like. She bought one of the scrolls that we had, and took the referral to our temple for more. Then she asked the strangest thing...”

Toby interrupted, his tone very neutral, “She asked about the Axe of McGrondle.”

All eyes were on the minotaur now.

Will nodded slowly. “Y-yes, in fact. When I told her that I didn’t know anything, and Rick also confessed his lack of knowledge, she started to cry. Why, I’m not sure.”

Toby shrugged. “Angry I imagine. It has been her quest for some fifteen years now, and she’s not getting any younger.”

“So you know her?”

Toby nodded. But he did not elaborate.

I had to ask, “Was she so angry she just started crying, like a high stress situation?”

Rick chimed in, “No Sorch, minotaurs don’t experience emotions in the same way as we do. All emotion, to them, falls on some scale of sadness or joy.”

Will added, “It’s called binary emotion. When we would experience rage, they would experience a deep sadness and a need to rectify that sadness. Love, to them, is just extreme joy. It’s why you never assume a minotaur’s emotional state. You ask.”

Toby, truth be told, looked a little sad right now. I asked him, “How do you feel?”

The question startled him, and he perked up a little. He laughed. “Mired in the past. But I’m fine now, really.”

Rick peered at the large paladin for a moment, then he shrugged. “Anyway, she left the shop and headed over to the temple. That was the last we saw of her. I imagine she’s still looking for that axe.”

Toby nodded. “She is. Always.”

Just then we heard the call for a stop. The caravan had found a suitable campsite. Chores were doled out, and chores were accomplished. Our little group opted for our own fire tonight, needing a break from the communal nature of caravan life.

We went through the perishables that we had left in our personal supplies before they had the chance to go bad. Bread, soft cheese, salted meats, and the last of the fresh fruit. The nature of the hodgepodge meal allowed us to snack and chat well into the night.

“So.” I prompted our resident minotaur. “Who is this Toby, and why is he here?”

The burly paladin smiled. “Right. Well, my name is Toby McGoldberg. This is my sixty-seventh year. I am a Paladin of the Order of the Snow, a guardian of Ice House, Aro-Remset’s left hand, and servant of the Old Gods of Good. But Toby is fine, if it pleases you.”

He tapped his hooves lightly on the rocks that we had used to ring the fire. “I was actually born in Ice House. My parents taught me what was important in life: Justice, defending the defenseless, beauty in the arts, and embracing The Wandering. The Wandering is an impulse all of my kind have, to travel, to adopt a quest or an ideal, to explore the world and the cultures of Panos. So when I was older, long after I joined the Order of the Snow as a paladin, I traveled. In the name of the Order and out of respect for The Wandering, I made pilgrimage all over the elven and orc lands. Recently, my Wandering became less compelling. I bought a house in Ice House, so I’m quite happy when my adventures bring me home.”

I asked for a clarification, “What is the Order of the Snow, and how does it relate to your god?”

Toby nodded a few times, indicating that I had hit upon a good point. “The Order of the Snow is a unified temple that combines the clerics, paladins, and militant faithful of several different gods. The pantheon represented spans all of the major races, and encompasses the gods that are generally considered ‘good’. In essence, if you worship and fight for one of these deities in and around the Ice House area, you are welcome to join. It allows us to pool our resources to do a lot of good, while at the same time putting aside petty racial and regional differences.”

With the foundations laid, I started asking detailed questions. I asked many, many questions.

Toby, like all minotaurs, had a passion for the dramatic. He loved acting, poetry, parades, and grand displays. Toby had been an actor and a singer in a wandering troupe for a number of years prior to taking his oaths. By his own admission, he was average at best, but he enjoyed the experience tremendously.

One thing that I appreciated about the minotaur: He carried no prejudice in his heart, allowing actions to define how he felt about someone. He actually mentioned befriending a half-orc from the northern tribes, and promised to introduce us should our path ever take us in that direction.

Toby’s Wandering had taken him all over the continent. Every adventure that brought profit resulted in a titing. Much like I set aside funds for my people, the minotaur set funds aside for his Order. Most recently, the paladins of Aro-Remset were gathering donations for the centennial celebrations. In a couple of months, the Arcane University would be holding parades and magical demonstrations in every major city on Panos. Toby and his people planned to have grand representation in every parade, followed by a feast for the poor in each location.

He explained, “I’ve been assigned to help organize the parade in Royal Moffit, the capital city in your southlands. Hundreds of mages will be on hand to demonstrate their arts, but they do not have... how can I put this kindly? They don’t have the kind of flair and pageantry that my people are known

for. So we shall provide coordination, protection, and some amount of emergency services should there be any injuries. Accidents happen.”

The minotaur licked his fingers clean, as he finished off the last of the cheese. “Anything else? I’ll tell you more about Ice House when we get there. You must be sick of hearing my voice by now.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sick of it, your voice is like a rumbled melody. But you’ve held up your end of the bargain.”

The bull-man stretched. “Good! Then I think we should turn in. There’s a small stream nearby, the last we’ll see for quite a while. I suggest we all get a bath before we leave in the morning.”

There was a lot of subtle sniffing after the minotaur walked away from the fire. Silently, we all agreed with the wisdom of our companion’s plan.

Chapter 10

I hated to admit it, but the caravan master was right. The next couple of days brought us out of the somewhat bleak plains north of Limt, and into the extra-bleak wastelands of the former Gray empire. Two hundred years ago, it is said that these plains were lush and arable. But on our journey, the soil was a dusty, chalky white. Only the most hardy grass was growing and only in small misshapen patches.

To make things worse, the trip would be getting colder as we moved towards the mountainous equator. And of course, that constant slight incline leading up to the proper mountains would be a wear on the horses, meaning longer rest periods and more resources burned through.

The good news was that in such a featureless area, the scouts could see out to the horizon in all directions. The bad news was that anyone looking to make trouble would see us coming an hour in advance. Easily enough time to set up an ambush. With that in mind, one might think that we should focus our scouting efforts to the north so that we would be more likely to catch out those looking to set up an unpleasant surprise for us. But most eyes were fixed on the western horizon.

To the west, far out of sight but never out of mind, was Castle Gray. Rick told me all about the history of the place soon after I gave him the electrum coins to sell. The empire had died generations ago. The only issue was that nobody told its defenders. Armies of the Gray rose again after the mystical annihilation of their castle and the surrounding city. Some say that the last king of the Gray lands, Sir Rhoaden Beleafast, had made a deal with dark powers and things had gotten out of control. Apparently mages from the Arcane University had tried to spy on proceedings within the broken husk of Castle Gray. After briefly seeing a giant mummified figure on a dark throne, their magical eyes were banished from existence, and white hot pain was sent back through the magical link until it was severed.

The upshot of this unfortunate set of circumstances: We had far more to fear from the dead in this place than anything alive. Toby had prepared for this leg of the journey, securing a few flasks of holy water from his Order's monthly moonlight rituals. When the minotaur told me how much silver is consumed during that ritual, I groaned: It was more than a year's worth of my material component requirements for Augmented Intelligence. But he assured me that the potent water produced was like a powerful acid to undead creatures.

The holy water was poured into small clay pots, and then the lids were sealed onto the containers with wax. Each of the guard groups received two of these pots. Toby noted, "As long as you touch the undead or demonic creature with the pot, it will shatter. It will even work on ghostly creatures as the water itself passes through their incorporeal forms. The water wants to get out, it wants to purify the taint of evil."

Two days passed. Perhaps the real enemy in these lands was boredom. Or perhaps the enemy was depression. Either way, there was a palatable mood shift among the caravan members. Everything was more quiet, more somber. It was as in if happiness might be seen as an affront to these lands and undead retaliation would be the result.

I wasn't a very superstitious man. I believed that the gods existed certainly, I saw that their followers had power. And I knew that dark forces existed as well, it was hard to deny in a world such as this. But I had no god that I would call my own. Unlike Shaman and his beloved Kenvunk, unlike Will and Rick with their revered Vinara, and unlike Toby and his mighty Aro-Remset... I lacked a personal

connection with the powers that be. I never felt that I owed the gods anything. In fact, maybe they owed me a little something for the years of oppression and abuse that I suffered, often times justified in their names.

But even a skeptic such as myself felt a very real mental weight for no particular reason. It was as if the chalky earth had seeped into my pores and invaded my mind, making it sluggish. Maybe the air itself, smelling of absolutely nothing in a place with so little nature, carried some nefarious vapor into our lungs that made us forlorn all of the time. Whatever it was, even I had to admit that the effect of this place was very real, on a physical and mental level. I for one would be glad to reach the snow capped mountains in the distance.

The third morning in these desolate plains started like the last two. We ate our iron rations and drank our bitter coffee. The horses plodded along with as little enthusiasm as we had seen in days. The sun rose higher in the sky, but similar to the last two mornings, it didn't bring with it the usual degree of warmth or comfort.

But today there would be a difference. Today, we heard a shout from the rear wagon. The elves had spotted something.

On the western horizon, a cloud of chalky dust had risen. Over time, the cloud grew. Something was closing in on us.

Miles estimated that we had at least another twenty minutes of travel before we would have to stop and make preparations to receive whatever those things were. He went from wagon to wagon, letting each driver know exactly what was going to happen when he gave the order to stop.

Meanwhile, the elves made good use of their keen eyes and scouting magics to give us regular updates as to what we were facing. At first they were able to tell us that there were riders. The next update said that the riders were not human. The update after that said the horses being ridden were skeletal. Finally, a couple of minutes before Miles called a stop, the elves said that the riders themselves were skeletal as well. Lovely.

When the undead raiders on the horizon were discernible to human and orcish eyes, Miles gave the order. The wagons were quickly circled. Cargo that could sustain a direct charge (crates of armor, weapons, and the like) were lined up directly to the west, while the more delicate cargo was situated towards the east. The horses were gathered in the center of the wagons for protection. As bows wouldn't be particularly effective against a creature that was nothing but bones, the elves and front line warriors prepared for melee combat. Almost a score of the crew and passengers used slings to hunt small game and defend themselves. They were organized into groups situated on the inside of the circle, waiting to be called upon. Their heavy stones could be quite effective against skeletal opponents.

Toby stalked out to the front of the circle of wagons. He was the tip of the spear. The armored minotaur was an impressive sight. I swear his broadsword and shield were glowing slightly, and the others noticed this effect as well. Toby projected an aura of confidence. The other guards were quick to array themselves around and behind him.

The mages, myself included, crouched in the driver's seats of the three wagons on the western side of the circle. It meant we could 'fire' over the heads of our comrades, and then if necessary drop down to join them when things got more chaotic.

Everyone was in position now, but it would take another minute before the undead riders were in range. It gave me time to... appreciate them, if 'appreciate' is the right word for the queasy

admiration that I had to grant the unfortunate creatures. They rode fearlessly towards us, never tiring. Their formation was even more perfect in death than it had been in life. A wedge of riders with rusted shields and tarnished longswords was followed by a group of riders with javelins and maces. All tallied, perhaps a hundred skeletal warriors and as many horses were charging our position.

...until the Fireball hit.

Rick was an accomplished mage and scholar, with knowledge of some of the most obscure artifacts in all of Panos. But when that blindingly bright ball of flame exploded inside the main mass of riders, it was hard to think of him as anything but a battlemage. He timed it perfectly, catching part of the lead group but mostly focusing on the ranged minions towards the back. There was no force behind it, it wasn't an explosion in the traditional sense, only a sudden raging inferno. A dozen and a half of the creatures and their mounts went up like dry tinder.

Will, that kind and gentle man that I had come to know, then showed me that he was just as accomplished as his partner. A flash of lightning arced from his fingers, and in an instant the undead army's left flank was decimated. At least ten of the riders fell, sun-bleached bones splintered and smoking in the aftermath. Inside of the circle of wagons behind us, the living horses were throwing a fit as the loud thunderclap rolled over them.

I waited. My job was spot control: Identify people in trouble and help them, or identify important targets and single them out. Since the front line of skeletons was about to crash into our main fighting unit, there would be a lot of people who needed help very shortly.

Though perhaps not quite as much help as I imagined. Thirty paces from the impact zone, Toby stepped forward, brandishing his shield. The symbol of Aro-Remset flashed golden as the minotaur shouted, "Back to the hells with you!" I had heard of holy men 'turning' the undead, but I had never seen it before. It was as in if Toby's words washed over the charging skeletons and simply undid them. Bones fell away from bones, losing whatever unholy cohesion that they once had. Around fifteen of the ancient swordsmen found their final rest. Mounts without riders simply fled, running back towards their home in the west. The paladin had singlehandedly blunted the charge, allowing our wedge of armored men to engage on their own terms.

It was inevitable that the undead army had their chance, and now was the time. Javelins arced in and struck our fighters, most of them repelled by their armor and shields but some of them finding softer flesh. The cries of our people triggered a kind of cold rage inside of me. So it was with a certain cruel pleasure that I shouted, "Fire!"

From the tops of some of the nearby wagons, our slingers sent stones arcing into the back line of riders. Having spent their first volley of spears on our warriors, they couldn't retaliate against our unarmored second line. Heavy rocks rained in, smashing into several of the javelineers and taking a few out of the fight. Our slingers slid back down to safety, awaiting their next opening.

Soon after the exchange of missile weapons, I saw my first opportunity to help. The right side was getting pressed heavily. No fire or lightning had touched them, and undead swordsmen were going to overwhelm our warriors if nothing was done. I quickly dug out some spider's silk from my pouch and fanned my fingers towards the enemy. My incantation was quick, and thick webbing glued riders to horses, and horses to the ground. They would be stuck for some time, unable to press the advantage on the right flank while our warriors dealt with the current wave of foes. With the adrenaline of battle, I hardly felt the drain. But with each spell I knew that I would be less reasoned

and probably more aggressive.

Swords and axes chopped through brittle bone. Undead warriors were sent to their final rest, and their mounts soon followed. At the head of our warriors was Toby. The bull-man's massive broadsword flashed in the morning sun, sending white shrapnel and the dust of long-dried marrow everywhere. Everyone around him seemed inspired by the sight, and even those who were wounded fought on bravely.

Will and Rick sent tiny mystical darts into the back line, disabling two more of the javeliners before they could heft their next missile. I opted for helping the front line's pressured right flank. Picking up one of the pots of holy water, I hurled it at one of the more massive mounted skeletons. Even with the advantage of high ground, I missed the main target. The creature's horse was not so lucky however. The pot shattered against its right flank, and the mount's pelvis and femur melted in spectacular fashion. The huge undead rider was thrown to the ground as its horse perished, evening the odds.

A javelin tore through the wagon's covering to my left, and a second one embedded into the wood of the driver's seat. Further to my left, I heard a cry. "Rick is down!" It was Will's voice. A few moments later and a strange fog rolled in over the two caravans that the partners had been manning. The smaller human had created cover so that he could help our ally. I was upset and wanted to rush over to my friends, but the analytical part of my mind took over: Two mages were out of the fight, as one took care of the other. I needed to step up.

I channeled my anger into a single word. "Fire!" Having spent their volley on the mages, the ranged skeletons could only watch helplessly as another cloud of heavy stones arced in and smashed into their dwindling numbers. I saw motion off to my right, much closer than expected. One of the unliving swordsmen had started to claw and crawl its way up the side of a neighboring wagon. I pointed and hissed out the words to my second oldest spell. I watched with satisfaction and a growing sense of bloodlust as the creature was hurled to the ground and shattered by my Force Bolt. At this point, the mental drain was somewhat desired. My bloodlust was rising, and I was welcoming it.

Toby was helping to shore up the right flank now. The elves were dragging a human back towards my position, the young warrior too injured to carry on. I helped to haul the bleeding, semiconscious fighter into the passenger's seat, and then handed the taller elf my last pot of holy water. There was a flash of begrudged respect in his eyes before he turned to rejoin the battle. Shortly after, I saw a skeleton melt away just before it could deliver an overhead blow that would have surely killed someone.

Just as I was feeling some relief that I had perhaps saved a life, I spotted something. Walking calmly towards the front line was a creature unlike the others arrayed before us. It was wearing coppery scale mail armor that had not deteriorated from the ravages of time. It carried no shield, just a battleaxe that was strangely purple in hue. And it stalked towards Toby from the nearly bare left flank. The thing was moving with intent, as in if it was on a mission. I did some quick mental calculations. I didn't see any way that Toby could face this thing and still hold the line.

It was up to me.

"Fire at will!" I shouted, realizing that if we didn't engage the remaining javeliners, nothing Toby or I did was going to save us. Freed from my other obligations, I opened up on the creature. One might assume that this was some kind of a warchief for this otherwise mindless band of undead. I palmed what I needed from my pouch. The beetle guts melted in my fingers and formed the Acid Bolts that

sailed across the battlefield and into the creature's chest. They melted through armor and into bone, causing the creature to open its jaw in a silent, enraged scream.

I had its attention.

The drain was very real this time. My higher reasoning was melting away. It was being replaced with rage. Rage at the uncertain fate of my friends. Rage at the pointlessness of fighting an army that died over a century ago. I found that it was easier to be angry when I was dumber. Sometimes logic was overrated anyway.

I dropped down from the wagon and stalked across the bleak plain. First, I conjured my Invisible Shield as the distance closed between me and my foe. The burnt stick was in my right hand a moment later, and with my final spell I summoned a fiery cutlass.

I was blind to the desperate melee taking place behind me and to my right. I was deaf to the whizzing of sling stone as they peppered skeletons in the distance. I was a primitive once more, drained of all that useless mental capacity.

Now, I wasn't the best swordsman in the world. It was fair to say that even though it was dead, the warchief had an advantage. We spent the better part of twenty seconds circling, probing for weakness. The skeleton committed first, and I barely raised my Invisible Shield in time to keep my head attached to my shoulders. The strength this thing had was unreal. That single impact had numbed my forearm.

It followed up the first attack with a series of chops that might not have impressed a warrior, but would make any woodcutter proud. It had opted to power its way through me, and so far it was working. I staggered backwards to avoid a wild slash, shield-blocked a thrust with the axe's spiked tip, then half-parried the next blow, allowing most of the force to travel past me. My riposte just bounced off of its armor and sent cinders flying every which way.

The undead warchief seemed to have learned what it needed to know. The next swing was parallel to the ground, and I misjudged how low it was sailing. Some of the force was absorbed by the very bottom of my shield, but the remaining momentum carried the edge of the blade into my left hip. There was a spray of blood, a sickening thud of steel on bone, and a flash of white hot pain from the tips of my toes to the base of my skull.

My return blow was already in motion as the skeleton's attack connected. I had been aiming for its exposed femur, but as I screamed and fell the arc of my blade caught the creature's tibia. There was a flash of flame as the full weight of my falling body got behind the counter-strike.

We fell in a heap. I was screaming, it was thrashing. The gash on my hip was bleeding profusely, and the left side of my lower body was not responding. The undead warchief was missing its left leg below the knee, and the axe had clattered away upon impact with the ground. My left hand had unclenched when I grasped at my wounded hip, causing the Invisible Shield to melt away. But I maintained the death-grip on my conjured cutlass, despite the pain and shock... or perhaps because of it.

I don't know what I was thinking, or if I was thinking at all. I just found myself clawing my way up the skeletal fiend's lower body as it tried to push me away and reach its axe. I saw the hole that my acid had burnt in its scale mail, and brutally thrust my sword into its body cavity.

Suddenly the undead warchief was ablaze. I quickly let go of the blade, causing it to disappear, but the mundane fire remained. As fast as I could with one arm and one leg, I scrambled away from my

now-burning skeletal foe. In a morbid and absurd race, it clawed at the ground and dragged its burning body after me, shrieking silently all the while.

But before I could either pass out or the burning warchief could catch and embrace me in a final act of fiery vengeance, there was a crunching sound. I looked back to see a big hoof buried in the smouldering skull of my foe. Toby had made it.

With the death of their warchief, the rest of the undead strike force immediately retreated to the west. There they could find a different undead commander and start the process over again, for the glory of their dead king. Any stragglers that could not walk or ride away were quickly crushed by our vengeful warriors.

The rest of the morning was a blur. In fact I don't recall much until the middle of that afternoon. But one thing I do remember clearly was being laid next Rick, surrounded by a dozen other wounded folk. I glanced over and knew that he was worse off than I was. They had removed the javelins from his shoulder and his gut, but his chest was hardly moving. If I 'might' bleed out from my wound, Rick's death was a near certainty.

But then a huge figure crouched before us and blocked out the sun. There were no words at all. Two huge hands started to glow and were pressed to Rick's belly. Instead of the hands becoming bloody, the human's wound seemed to be infected by the glow.

I had never seen a paladin perform the 'laying of hands'. I knew it was a daily favor granted to them, but I didn't realize the significance. There were no materials exchanged, no incantation. It was just the raw power of Toby's god channeled through the hands of the faithful. It was beautiful.

Then the minotaur shifted his hands to my leg and side. They were no longer glowing, but I heard that low, silky smooth bass voice murmuring a plea to Aro-Remset. It was only a minor divine invocation, but I didn't care about the pedigree of the spell, as long as it worked. The bleeding slowed. The bone no longer felt fragmented. Some of the pain was gone. It was enough to help me find the sweet oblivion of unconsciousness for a few hours.

When I opened my eyes again, I was packed into the back of our wagon, wrapped up in a thick blanket beside Rick. Will was chatting with the much-weakened human at my side, and Toby was smiling absently as he watched me regain consciousness.

I reached up with my right hand to touch Toby's chest and murmur, "Ruined."

The minotaur glanced down to see me touching his tabard, slashed to pieces and drenched in the blood of his friends and allies. He murmured, comfortingly, "It's okay."

"How many dead?" I croaked.

The big bull-man shook his head. "None. Thanks to you."

They relayed the aftermath of the battle to me: There were several wounded, many as severely as myself. But because of The Magic Shop's meager stash of minor healing potions, and because of the actions of Toby, Sister Janet, and a couple of civilian clerics making the journey, everybody made it. Like us, they would require bed rest for a few days because the healing was spread so thin. But Sister Janet proclaimed that no deaths in an assault of that magnitude was nothing short of miraculous.

As the minotaur checked in on Rick, I was treated to a visit from my small human friend. Will asked how I was, but I just gave him a grunt. He got worried and called Toby back over, and then I had both

of them prodding me and asking me questions. I brushed them away, irritatedly.

“Me no like talk, when like dis.”

The minotaur raised a brow and looked at Will. The small human shook his head.

“Sorch, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You’re probably not going to be able to cast for a day or two. There’s no need to take a vow of silence until then. Besides, ummm...”

He shared a glance with Toby, who also said, “Ummm...”

I looked up at the two of them from my makeshift bed. “What?” I asked, irritated.

The human sighed a bit. “You’re sort of ‘outed’ as an orc, my friend.”

Toby explained, quickly, before I could get all worked up. “Your hood fell off as you were crawling away from the burning skeleton. Not to mention that your wounds were being treated along with everyone else, and it’s hard to miss that your skin is green, even through all that blood.”

I threw up my hands, in silent exasperation. Then I winced, because everything still hurt.

From off to my right, I heard Rick’s voice. It was good to hear since just a few hours ago I would have written him off as a dead man. “It doesn’t matter Sorch. After what you did, these people see you as a hero, no matter what race you happen to be.”

Toby was quick to nod his agreement. “Even the elves said that your bravery should be lauded. Elves! Complimenting an orc. I had to check if the sun was still moving in the sky, or if this was the end of days.”

I snorted, but relaxed. They must have seen it in my posture as the tension melted away from abused muscles, because there were faint, relieved chuckles at my reaction.

“Anyway, that’s about the size of it.” said Will. “The only things of value were the armor and the axe on the fiend that you fought. Everyone agreed that the armor should go to that young man who the elves pulled out of battle, as he could use the upgrade in equipment. One of the smiths and I will mend it, physically and magically, and then gift it to him. The axe has a minor enchantment on it, and the group said that we could sell it to make up for the healing potions that got used up.”

“Seem fair.” I croaked.

In two days I was able to start casting spells again without pain thanks to Toby’s constant care, as well as frequent visits from Sister Janet. A couple of days after that and I was fully recovered, from a mental standpoint. Nobody made fun of me for my heritage or for my temporary mental weakness. In fact, the only person to mention it was Sister Janet, who wanted to hear all about my life and document it in the caravan’s history. I agreed to the retelling. Others listened quietly as I recounted my life and journey so far, but out of respect, only Janet asked questions. I was more than happy to spend a couple of nights by the fire with her, watching her experienced hands stroke ink into parchment.

The rest of the journey transpired without major incident. Ashy plains melted away, and with them the ominous foreboding of the land of the dead king. Snow dusted the ground as we climbed into the foothills. Each day was colder, crisper than the last.

The morning of the first snow, Toby looked a little sad. So I asked him, “What’s wrong, my big friend?”

The minotaur sighed. "I love my home, but now I have to wear boots again. I hate boots."

Eventually hills gave way to mountains, and there was ankle-deep snow in every direction. Hunting picked up again, and the occasional rabbit or fox would supplement our dry meals.

The last day was slow going, as fresh snow was falling. Rather than make camp for the night, we ate and then were told to mount back up. Miles said that the crew would press on into the wee hours so that we could reach their permanent camp outside the city. They had both mundane and magical means to light their way. He told us all to get some rest on the wagons, and by dawn we would be at the destination.

We bid our farewells to everybody that night, as much of the crew would likely be asleep when we waked, and the other guards and passengers would likely have their own schedules to keep. Sister Janet granted us her final blessing, and told us that she looked forward to seeing us again in the future, if fate was so kind to allow it.

The four of us climbed into our wagon and bundled up. Four people couldn't lay out recumbent in the free space available, but three of us could sit up in comfortable little blanket-cocoons and still give Toby enough space. I was almost excited enough to stay up all night, but after around three weeks on the road, I was feeling quite exhausted. Nature won out. I closed my eyes, knowing that when I woke it would be the first day of Late Fall. After what dreams might come, I would be in the heart of Ice House, the city of adventure.

Chapter 11

Ice House's southern gate was much like Limt's northern gate. Just colder. All of the larger caravan companies had built permanent offices here. The 'alcove', an area that referred to the wide open space outside the gates where multiple caravans could load and unload, was well policed by both company and city watchmen. By the time we woke most of the staff was inside the A.S.C. barracks, catching some much needed sleep. Their compatriots, based here in Ice House, were doing the inventory and unloading shipments that the company was responsible for.

After much grumbling and groaning, we managed to emerge from our relatively warm cocoons. Will had thoughtfully provided a coat for me to wear over my cloak, a detail that I wouldn't have remembered. We joined the queue of people inside of the Advanced Scouting and Commerce warehouse, waiting for them to sign off on a job well done. Miles was there personally to shake our hands, and we were invited back any time. Once all accounts were settled and papers signed, our troop of four headed through the south gate and into the city proper.

When I first entered Ice House, I wasn't sure what I would find. I knew it to be a melting pot of sorts, and on that account I was proven correct. Predominantly, the city was populated by elves and humans in fairly even numbers. But sprinkled into the population was a fair number of every civilized race on Panos: Orcs of course, minotaurs, were-wolves, were-cats, halflings, lizardmen, and a host of other minor species. All of them bundled up against the cold, some of them looking wary, but nobody holding any obvious or open aggression towards me or each other... at least not in broad daylight or in the middle of Main Street.

What I was unprepared for was the architecture. The entire city was surrounded by icy mountain walls, save for the north and south gates which were hand-laid stone. As far as buildings went, there were four kinds of structures: Dusky gray stone mined from the mountain itself was a common building material for the older buildings. Lightly colored, almost white wood was the material of choice for the newer structures. Over a quarter of the city was, surprisingly, made of glass. The thick glass buildings (undoubtedly summoned by elven magic) were the basis of agriculture in Ice House, serving as the city's greenhouses. Finally, ice itself was the most common building material on the outer edge of the city. Often these buildings were natural formations of some kind, and extended into the cave systems to the east and west of the city. The sheer amount of ice and glass gave Ice House its crystalline look and feel.

I looked around in wide-eyed wonder. It was more ice and snow than I had ever imagined. The beauty, the purity of it all was unreal to me. More than once I had to be guided and tugged along by my friends. In short, I looked like a tourist. But in that moment, I didn't really care.

Just then, I swear that I heard Shaman's voice in my head. 'Is it wonderful?'

"Yeah."

Rick paused to ask, "What was that Sorch?"

"Nothing."

After walking down Main Street for ten minutes, we turned sharply and entered a narrow alley. A few moments later, our party approached the rear of one of the old stone buildings. The sign hanging above the door said, amusingly, 'The Spastic Vole'. Toby was smiling toothily. Rick and Will

were grinning as well. Clearly this was a fun place of some sort.

After having entered the establishment, I had to admit that I was a little confused. Clearly there was a tavern aspect to the place. People were drinking and having a good time at the stone bar just to the left of the entryway. As I was led farther into the room by my friends, I became even more puzzled. It looked like the right hand side of The Spastic Vole was a fully functional restaurant of some kind. The scent of wood fired bread rolls and fresh roasted rabbit assailed my nostrils in the most fantastic fashion. My friends ignored my pleas to try out the local fare, instead dragging me deeper into the room.

We passed through some heavy wool curtains. They were the only opening that allowed one through the wood and cloth privacy partitions that stretched from floor to ceiling. Clearly the intention was to deaden the noise in this area so that it didn't reach the drinkers and diners near the front of house. This part of The Spastic Vole was less well lit. Only flickering torchlight guided us towards the back wall. We took a seat at one of the comfortable corner booths.

"I promise you Sorch, we can still order food here." Will assured me.

Toby snorted. "You can order a lot here."

Rick elbowed the big man. "Don't ruin the surprise."

"Fine, fine."

"Seriously, you'll scare poor Sorch, he's never been to the big city."

"Fine!"

I looked from the face of the minotaur, to that of the tall man, and finally settled on Will as the friendliest source of information. "Will. Why are there metal poles on that stage?"

He giggled. "Oh, well. You know, Sorch. They're props for our live performances."

I tilted my head. "What do you mean 'our' performances? You participate?"

My question cause Toby to snort and bellow out a helpless stream of laughter. Will started slapping his shoulder to try and get the minotaur to stop, to no avail.

As the small human tried and failed to calm the bull-man, Rick answered the question. "Not as such. Toby, Will, and myself are investors in this place. The main owner is our last adventuring partner, who I believe you'll be meeting shortly."

Will flagged down a waiter, declaring that the best way to shut up a minotaur was to stuff his face. Toby agreed. A round of fresh baked and buttered sage and thyme rolls appeared, followed by flagons of dark ale and a plate of roasted carrots and honey coated chicken legs. The food seemed to melt in my mouth. All due respect to Will and Rick's cooking, but this was the best meal that I had ever eaten.

As I sopped up the honey-pepper gravy with the rest of my bread roll, there was a raucous cheer. I popped the remainder of the meal into my greedy maw, and then looked around to see what the cause of this commotion might be.

Up on the stage was a were-cat. I had seen a few in passing as we entered Ice House. They were exotic creatures. The ones we had passed didn't make eye contact, instead cloaking their faces and moving quickly past. Then again, those creatures were more... heavily dressed than this one.

Rick slapped me on the shoulder. "Sorch, meet Ames!" He had to shout to be heard over the whooping and hollering.

Ames was dressed only in a thin gown of black cotton. The feline was covered in thick white fur from eartips, to tailtip, to toes. In addition to protecting the cat from arctic temperatures, it obscured any hint of Ames' gender. The were-cat moved across the stage with the kind of lithe grace one would expect from a feline species. Each step was deliberate, firm black footpads meeting the polished wood of the stage with gentle precision. I stared, transfixed by the performance.

I had to ask, "Is Ames... I should say, what gender is-"

Toby cut the question off. "We don't know. And amongst their people it is exceedingly rude to ask. There's some ancient history involved best left to another time. They seem to know when confronted with another were-cat. But with others... let's just say they'll let you know if they want you to know."

I nodded. For the moment it would remain a mystery.

Looking back up at the stage, I watched as the cat stalked up to one of the metal poles. Ames rubbed their cheek against the cold iron. Then the feline did something that made the audience whistle and shout. The cat slowly opened their maw and dragged that long pink tongue several inches up the polished metal rod.

Such a display was more overtly lewd than anything I had seen before. I wasn't totally unexposed to sexual themes or expressions. When I was younger and times were better, there were nights with some of the unmated tribal girls. They definitely 'educated' me on the basics. But it was private, quiet. Nothing like this.

Ames scanned the room as they slowly circled the pole, one leg locked around it at the knee to serve as a pivot point. Will and Rick whistled and waved their arms. The cat's visage brightened, and they inclined their head towards our table. I found myself on the receiving end of an intense stare, those deep emerald eyes seeming to drink me in. I felt like I was being hunted, for a brief moment.

The dancer finished that slow 180 degree turn. With their back facing the audience, a single sharp claw was extended, and the laces holding that flimsy cotton garment together were sliced. When it fell away there was more shouting from the audience of course. Ames' fluffy white tail twitched and swayed above the fuzzy feline rump, which slowly shook and gyrated as the cat rubbed their body lewdly against the pole.

That was when I discovered that I loved pole dancing.

The rest of the dance was somewhat of a blur. I know that my jaw never fully closed, and I must have looked like either a country bumpkin or an idiot. Nobody seemed to mind though, particularly not Ames. At one point the feline locked eyes with me and resumed that intense stare, before slowly allowing their legs to part and sinking into a full side split. It certainly got a reaction out of me, and out of many others in the crowd as well. The dance ended shortly after, to a round of applause and catcalls.

Then, before I realized what was happening, Ames was walking over to join us. Far too late, I thought that maybe I should scoot in and make room. But the feline took the decision out of my hands. Without missing a beat, the exotic dancer slipped into my lap and wrapped those warm arms around my neck. "Why hello Toby, and Will, and Rick. I see you've brought me a chew toy, how thoughtful!"

I'm not proud to admit that I yelped when those sharp teeth briefly nipped at the green skin of my

ear.

Toby snorted. "You have enough toys already, Ames. Sorch, as you might have figured, this is Ames. Ames, this is Sorch."

Will interjected, "He has a fascinating story. Absolutely riveting."

Then Rick chimed in, "And since we need you to babysit him for a couple of days while we make our deliveries and prepare for the expedition, you'll have plenty of time to hear it."

I must have made sounds of protest or objection. Certainly no words were actually formed by my swimming head. Ames shushed me, putting a plush digit over my lips. I sat as still as I could under their very close examination. After a few moments, the cat reached down to grab one of my arms and forcibly wrap it around their midsection. "Hmmm. I suppose I could do that for you boys. I'll show him the town." I'm not certain if the feline even knew they were doing it, but that fluffy rump was slowly swaying in my leather-clad lap.

Toby warned Ames, "Don't get him arrested. Particularly if you put me in the position to be the one arresting him."

The dancer stuck their tongue out at the minotaur, "Don't worry dear, I remember the last time you arrested me. There's no fun in it. It's just so boring in those cells."

A few things went through my mind. Firstly, my friends had just put me in the care of some kind of exotic dancer and felon. Secondly, they were partnered with this creature and for some reason, clearly they had a high level of trust in Ames. Third, I really didn't want to stand up right now. For modesty reasons, you understand.

But apparently I wasn't going anywhere. My friends were. They all rose and slid out of the other side of the booth. Toby spoke for the departing group. "Settled then. Sorch, enjoy the tour. Ames, we'll meet you here in exactly two days time. Dress appropriately." The ease with which the creature in my lap smiled and made an exceedingly rude gesture at the giant minotaur was disturbing.

That feline nose twitched, burrowing into my dull black hair as the creature explored my scent. Ames nosed their way over my left temple and then down to my ear. I shivered, feeling the whiskers tickle my lobe. In a sultry, breathy tone, the cat murmured something I'll never forget:

"I need to get downtown to fix a door. Come with me."

I didn't know if that was some kind of code, but it was just about the least sexy thing one could say in that situation. Mutely, I allowed myself to be led backstage. There were catcalls and playful jeers from the crowd as Ames took me to their dressing room. I closed the door behind us, it seemed like the right thing to do in any case.

The room was for more than just dressing apparently. It looked more like a tinkerer's workshop with an added bed and closet. Everything seemed quite tidy and well lit. Three oil lanterns hung from hooks in the ceiling, removing all hint of shadow from the windowless chamber. A bookshelf on the wall above the headboard of the bed was filled with both regional and global research materials. The bedding and pillows were all white. Given the potential fur shedding issues, that seemed to be a wise choice.

Ames let out a huge sigh of relief and rumbled, "Good show, I think. Grab my clothes and leathers from that chest would you?" The were-cat hurriedly started to assemble what looked like a custom

lock picking and door breach kit, taking parts and tools from the drawers of their workbench.

A little disappointed that things took a turn towards the mundane, I nevertheless did as I was asked. Upon hearing the chest close again, Ames lifted one leg, balancing on the toes of their right foot with ease. I watched the lithe creature. Specifically, I watched that fuzzy rump and swishing tail.

Pausing from their tool assembly, the feline glanced over their shoulder. A hint of a smirk graced that white muzzle. "Pants?"

I was jolted out of my erotic reverie by that simple one word request. Quickly I grabbed the golden hued breeches and helped my new adventuring partner to step into them. I've never been a body man before, but I think I did a fair job of dressing the were-cat. Their mind was occupied with assembling the kit required for this job, so I had to do most of the work. A simple linen undershirt, dyed gold to match the cotton pants, was slipped onto the creature when the opportunity arose. Then the brown leathers and boots followed. At that point, Ames had finished assembling their gear.

My efforts earned me a toothy smile and a peck on the cheek. "Thank you Sorch." the feline rumbled.

The cat belted on pouches and a sheath, then slid a meticulously cared for short sword from between the mattresses of the bed. It was sheathed and then peace-knotted. Once the gear was loaded into Ames' well used backpack, the two of us donned warm coats and slipped out of the room. We proceeded out the side door of The Spastic Vole.

We headed north using mostly side streets. This was a different perspective of the city, for sure. Debris was scattered amongst old shattered shipping crates. The homeless made their homes in whatever pile of warm material they could gather, usually backed up against a wall that had some sort of boiler, fireplace, or oven on the other side. Small gangs of 'citizens' were gathered around barrel fires, looking for marks that were either too naive or too drunk to understand the danger they were in. It should be noted; they always gave Ames a wide berth when we passed.

The cat opened up the conversation as we bustled. "So, you're an orcventurer are you?"

I had never heard the term before. I assumed it was just a little joke. "Indeed I am. Although I'm relatively new to the game. Most of my adventures revolved around survival until a few months ago. Actually seeking out danger and the unknown wasn't really part of my life as a tribesman. And you are a... catventurer?"

Ames seem pleased by the term. "I wish. I mean, I've been on a few of these expeditions, but my income comes from a lot of different sources. The Vole takes more than she gives sometimes, so I'm also a locksmith, a private dancer, and a body for hire."

I didn't need clarification to know that Ames wasn't talking about being a bodyguard.

The were-cat shrugged as we moved down a particularly tight little alley. "But I wish that I was a full time adventurer, at least when I'm not checking up on my business. I find it thrilling."

I laid a hand lightly on the white cat's shoulder as they deftly weaved through the cluttered alley. 'Just to help me keep up.' I thought to myself. "How much of the business do you still own?" I asked curiously.

The feline chuckled softly. "Seventy percent. Toby, Rick, and Will each own ten percent. It allows them to get free meals and drinks. They understand that they won't see any real profit for some

time, if at all.”

“It’s an interesting place.” I muttered, half to myself.

“Why thank you!” the feline rumbled. Damn cat ears.

Louder this time, I commented, “The booths are very comfortable. But some of those chairs look fairly dainty. I’d be afraid to sit in them.”

The feline turned their head and flashed a sharp, toothy smile at me. “You’re a big specimen certainly. Does that hold true everywhere?” At that particular moment, I didn’t expect the brief but firm grope that my crotch received.

I blushed a nice deep pine-green and stammered, “W-well, I... that is to say, maybe y-you should-”

“Too late greenskin. We’re here.”

We emerged from the last alley onto a bustling main street. Ames led me over to what I could only describe as a pawn shop. The building was made of stone, possibly so that no jilted lover or angry husband could burn it to the ground. There were windows filled with strange and seemingly miscellaneous items, and a metallic shutter that could be drawn over the windows and locked down at night.

The human shop owner was waiting for us by the front door, which had clearly been tampered with. “Ames, thank the gods. Some idiot tried to break in last night, and my key doesn’t work anymore. I think they poured acid in the lock or something, it’s a mess.”

Ames gave the tall man a toothy feline smile. “It’s alright Mister Benson, we’re going to replace the whole thing. When your message came in, I figured it was a lost cause attempting to repair it.”

A few simple words from the feline made the man’s countenance transform from stress to relief. “You’re the best, Ames.” There was a long pause as the gaunt man looked me over. “Ummm, who’s your friend?”

I quickly offered my hand, a ritual that Will had drilled into me. “Mister Benson, I’m Sorch Stonebender. It is good to meet you.”

A look of surprise bordering on shock passed over the merchant’s face. Instinctively, the long-fingered, pale hand reached out to shake my green, calloused one. “Mister Stonebender. May I say, you’re Common is quite a bit better than my Orcish.”

I smiled a little bit at that. In Orcish I said, “Not even orcs speak Orcish if it can be avoided.”

We both laughed at that. Ames looked up from their tinkering to mock-complain, “You’ve known each other for exactly one minute, and already you have secret jokes that I don’t understand.”

After apologising to the were-cat, Mister Benson asked me to tell my story. I’ve recited it so many times by now, I had a version of the entire thing that I could tell in a brisk hour and a half. The pawnshop owner pulled over a table and three chairs from the neighboring cafe, and ordered brunch for three while he was at it.

As Ames’ handpaws were covered with grease, we developed a system. The feline would growl over their shoulder, and I would pop one of the cafe’s tasty little meat rolls into an open and waiting maw. It was clear that the cat was listening to my story as they worked, ears flicking and swiveling when something of particular interest came up.

As I was covering the caravan trip, Ames was cleaning up. The were-cat was able to join us for the last fifteen minutes of the story, handpaws clutching a hot mug of tea. I tried my best to be neutral about both my role in the battle as well as my injuries. My two listeners were impressed nonetheless.

After I finished my tale, Ames chimed in, "The new double lock is in place Mister B." Two pairs of keys were slid across the table to the shopkeeper. "The majority of thieves won't even bother with this one. If you have any wards in place, make sure that the mage expands them to include the new lock."

The tall human pocketed one set of his new keys, and then tried the other set out on his brand new lock. The mechanism rotated smoothly, the shop door opening easily now. "You're a life saver Ames. Here you go, I know better than to offer you trade." He tossed a small pouch of coins to the feline. The pouch was deftly caught, and quickly tucked away.

I helped Mister Benson to move the table and chairs back to the cafe. A couple of handshakes later, and we were on our way back to the Vole. This time we were in no hurry, so we traversed the main streets. Ames played tour guide, and pointed out some of the important merchant and government buildings that were on route. By the time we made it back to The Spastic Vole, I had a better grasp of the layout and the management of Ice House.

Ames had to disappear for a while to attend to stockroom matters and to order some proteins. After a brief nap and performing my midday Enhancement spell, I looked around for something to do. I ended up in the back of the kitchen, helping to scrub and dry dishes. I didn't mind. It gave me a chance to chat with some of the staff members as we worked, which was a good way to try out my social skills in a casual situation.

When Ames caught up to me however, a slightly annoyed look spread across the feline's face.

"Sorch. You're a guest. Stop that."

I grinned at the were-cat. "Idle hands are the plaything of the underworld." I was unapologetic, but I did stop the voluntary work now that my host was back.

The feline threw a towel at me. "Dry up. I think we've both earned some supper."

After saying goodbye to the staff, Ames led me to a small booth along the northern wall that was equally distant from the bar, the stage, and the restaurant. The booth bordered on the privacy wall, but the first wooden post was inward from the booth. That meant that this particular seat could draw the privacy curtain back and check out the action on stage whenever they liked. Still, it was the most secluded spot in The Spastic Vole barring employee-only areas.

I commented, "I saw that you have snake on the menu tonight. Assuming that isn't too rare or expensive in these parts, I wouldn't mind seeing how you folks prepare it."

The cat tilted their head. "Well. Aren't you full of surprises. I suppose being from the swamp you used to have snake from time to time."

"From time to time." I affirmed.

Ames nodded. "Consider it done." The feline flagged down a waitress and ordered two portions of the BBQ snake with a root salad. I added an ale to the order, and my new companion asked for the same.

After the server departed, I quietly asked Ames, "Would it be too bold to ask you about yourself and your people? You heard my story, but I'm afraid I know next to nothing about your past."

The cat considered. "I guess it would be better if you heard it from me and avoided any embellishments, outright falsehoods, or other tall tales." The feline cleared their throat, and then launched into their story as we waited for our dinner.

"So. A thousand years ago, my race was once a lot like your own. We had smooth skin, and no tails. As I understand it, we were somewhere between orcs and elves in terms of body type. We were not really welcome in either society though. So we maintained a tribal culture, generally in cooler areas that weren't as desirable."

The feline lightly traced little circles on the tabletop with a claw tip. "But that all changed with the coming of the First Great War. The elves and the humans fought on a massive scale, and the elves were searching for any advantage that they could get. They figured if they could transform my people into full blooded elves, their armies would grow."

Ames paused to thank the waitress as our ales were delivered. They took a long sip before continuing.

"So in exchange for all of the benefits that elven society had to offer, the leaders of my people agreed to have our race magically and divinely transformed. There was a great gathering, and a ritual, and a planned celebration as tens of thousands of us were about to be reborn."

Ames glanced up at me and smiled, toothily and yet grimly at the same time. "But then something went wrong."

"In their attempt to divide our natures, the elven wizards and clerics created two races. The were-cats were the more independent and aloof creatures, while the were-wolves were more social and yet more violent in nature. It was chaos. My people, wolves and cats alike, treated it as a betrayal rather than an accident. They scattered to the four winds. Some of them even joined the human side of the conflict, when they were allowed."

I nursed my drink as the feline spoke. When they paused to take a sip, I asked, "And they were called were-creatures because they had the power to transform their natures, yes? Like modern day werebears and wererats?"

Ames nodded. "Back in the day, hundreds of years ago, yes. They could transition into humanoids, or even tap into their animal natures. That was how many of them came to serve in the human army... they simply posed as humans. But as the generations churned, it became more and more difficult to make that transformation. As of a couple hundred years ago, there's been no record of any of my people or the wolf people being able to transition."

I nodded back, then made a polite gesture to indicate that Ames could continue the story in their own time.

"Soon after the war was over, my people became hunted by slavers. Specifically the were-cats... the wolves were beasts of combat and didn't make for easy prey. My people, however, were known for their 'delicate skills'. Specifically the females. The males were known to be ornery, petulant, and violent; they weren't desired at all in the slave trade. In order to confuse the slavers and make them waste their time, my people used their transformation powers to take more androgynous forms. Everything that differentiated the males from the females of my species was either hidden under a thick coat of fur, or internalized. Now a lone were-cat on the road might be a male, useless to pursue

and of no value to them on the open market.”

“As I mentioned, transformation was getting more difficult with every generation. So eventually we became locked in this kind of a form. Androgynous in appearance. Not human or elf or orc, and not animal. But we retained a lot of the traits of our animal nature. In the case of were-cats such as myself, that included some fairly sketchy parenting skills. I was left to fend for myself at an early age, when perhaps a wild cat might be considered mature and ready, but frankly not a reasonable age for civilized humanoids.”

I must have looked sad, because Ames reached across the table and took my hand in their forepaw. “It’s alright. I learned quickly. Once my parents moved on, Ice House became my home. I know these streets, these caves, and this land as well as anyone alive. When I was hungry I could forage. When I was cold I could usually charm my way into some curious traveller’s bed for the night. When times were tough, I stole what I needed. And that’s how I met Toby.”

I smiled a little bit at the mention of the big minotaur, and the smile was echoed in the were-cat’s own face. The feline continued their story.

“Toby caught me stealing from The Order of the Snow. I robbed their main temple, over in the western quarter. He threw me in jail, and when I yelled at him he started to cry. Of course with a minotaur, that could mean they’re about to take your head off. But in Toby’s case I found out that he was genuinely sad. I had come to his attention weeks before. He had decided that the just thing, in my case, was to allow me to do whatever I had to do in order to survive. As long as I wasn’t hurting anyone in the long term. But an affront against the Order of the Snow couldn’t be ignored.”

Ames tapped the tabletop with a claw, absently. “I was in jail for two full seasons. But whenever he was around, Toby would visit. I went from hating him, to thinking he was crazy, to loving him for caring so much. Once I got out, he helped me to find the right people so that I could learn a legitimate skill: Locksmithing. Eventually he would introduce me Rick and Will, because their adventures sometimes involved traps and locks that they weren’t equipped to handle.”

The feline gestured around. “After a particularly profitable expedition a couple of years back, I financed this place, and those three hopeless optimists helped. And here we are.”

I thought that ‘here we are’ meant that the story was over, but Ames had actually noticed that food was arriving. The snake meat was still sizzling on the plate. I thanked the waitress as the main dishes and the salads were placed on the table.

When I glanced back at Ames, there was an set of expectant emerald eyes staring back.

“Umm, Sorch?”

I blinked and answered, “Yes?”

The cat glanced downwards and nodded. “I’m going to need my paw back to eat.”

I hadn’t even noticed that after Ames’ comforting gesture, I had never untwined my fingers from their forepaw. We had been holding hands for minutes. I flushed a bit and mumbled, “Oh, sorry.” Then I disengaged my fingers from that silky paw.

Ames canted their head to the side and offered a toothy grin. “Are you?”

The question hung in the air as we dug into our well spiced meal. But in my own mind I had already answered: ‘Absolutely not.’

My host informed me that these snakes were actually farmed and bred in some of the caves that bordered the city. Not only were they a good source of meat, but the snakes served as effective pest control for the city.

After the meal was over, Ames mentioned, "I'll probably be going out for a few hours tonight. You still look tired from the trip up, maybe you can get a little extra sleep."

I canted my head to one side. "Is it anything I can help with?"

The were-cat shook their head. "I just... I can't do my normal evening activity that brings in some extra cash."

I stared at the feline, blankly.

"Turning tricks, Sorch."

"Oh! Oh."

The cat rolled their eyes. "So I'll be engaging in some unsanctioned bounty hunting instead."

I eyed my host. "You mean vigilantism."

Ames stuck one fuzzy thumb up in the air. "Now you're catching on."

I shook my head. "Not alone. I'm coming with you."

"No. You may be what passes for stealthy in the swamps, but we're talking about sneaking up on professional thieves. You aren't equipped."

I considered. "I have a spell that creates a zone of silence. I could prepare it."

Ames was already shaking their head. "A void of noise is even more suspicious than too much. I'll be fine. Promise."

After dinner, we went our separate ways. I retired to Ames' room and performed my nightly rituals. But the feline had been correct, some extra bunk time after three weeks on the road was all too welcome. My fatigue overrode the vague sense of worry I was feeling for the were-cat's dangerous nocturnal activities. Sleep came quickly in that big, comfortable bed.

I awoke when a chill ran up my spine. It took me a few moments to realize, there was literally something bitingly cold pressed up against my spine.

I groaned, "Ames, you're freezing."

The shivering feline wrapped frigid arms around my body and placed cold paws on my chest, pressing in close. "Thrown into a snowbank. Warm me."

I whined, still half asleep. "Nooooo, why?"

The chattering of feline teeth an inch from my ear was quite the disturbing sound. Ames rumbled, "Don't be such a baby."

I grumbled, but it was only a few minutes of frigid torment. Quickly the blankets, the feline's fur, and our shared body heat did the job. Ames was once again warm, and I could get some much needed rest.

In the morning, I was the first awake. It took a surprising amount of effort to escape Ames' grasp, as

the cat grumbled about losing their orcish heat machine. After a few minutes I managed to get out of bed. Still in my underwear, I grabbed the magic pot, soap, and a towel. Then I made my way to the kitchen. Ames was asleep again before I even closed the door.

No fires had been lit yet as breakfast wouldn't be served for another hour or so. As I suspected. I filled my cooking pot with water from the hand pump and then activated it with the command word. "Blaze." I placed it on one of the stone preparation counters, and then transferred the hot water into a bucket. Properly armed, I went to the garderobe for a warm clean up, allowing the soapy water to flow into the sewer hole when I was finished. It would be the cleanest thing that happened in that room all day.

When I came back, I found a full gaggle standing around the side counter that I had recently used. The kitchen staff was amazed by my self-heating pot, and took advantage of it for the full duration. They added water for tea, for coffee, and finally to boil some eggs. As the provider of the heat, which seemed to be my role in general as of late, I was encouraged to sample all of these things.

By the time Ames woke up and stumbled out into the kitchen, I was perfectly clean and on the tail end of a nice little breakfast. The feline groaned. "No. Not a morning person. We're doomed."

Eventually the feline caught up to my level of civilization, though Ames chose the simpler breakfast option of black coffee and bacon rashers. I was told to go bundle up, which meant an outing of some sort. "Backpack. No valuables. No weapons." was the stipulation, which made me think we might be going to some official government building of some sort. Properly dressed and cloaked, the two of us headed out into the city.

It was snowing lightly in the streets of Ice House. The overcast sky and towering mountains blocked quite a bit of the natural light. Compared to the morning of our arrival, the place looked like a ghost town. Wisely, those who could stay indoors did stay indoors. We plodded west along the promenade.

As we approached the gaping cave known as the West Gate, I started to have a sneaking suspicion that we weren't going to a swanky government building after all. Torches greeted us rather than attendants garbed in silk robes. Those who passed us in the other direction generally wore scowls rather than rehearsed smiles.

We proceeded to exit the main cavern, which was generally occupied by mineral, gem, and coal merchants as well as their entourages. A narrow, serpentine passage brought us to a smaller cave. Perhaps the word 'den' applied. Den meaning 'den of thieves' in this case, rather than the home of a particular animal... though I wouldn't be surprised to see a semi-tamed wolf or two in someone's possession. If anything, our arrival inspired even more scowls. Ames ignored the vast majority of people, and they didn't get in our way. The were-cat knew exactly where we were going. I hoped.

We arrived at a small nook on the southern side of the den, where there was a were-wolf wearing a patch over his left eye, sitting behind a large table of wares. The lupine's gray fur was patchy in places, likely the result of old burns of some sort. His bodyguards were massive, muscled humans. Each of the guards was holding a studded iron kanabo in front of them. I had no doubt that these brutes could go from leaning on their two handed clubs to swinging them at our heads in a split second. Needless to say, I was on my best behaviour.

"Ames." drawled the lupine merchant. His tone was a study in disinterest.

"Malachi." rumbled my companion.

The two were-creatures eyed each other for a few pregnant moments. Then the lupine sighed. "What? What do you want?"

"Striped corobane. Adder venom. Coca leaves."

Malachi made a 'tsk tsk' sound. "Oh my dear kitten. Being naughty again." The merchant opened a small trunk under his table. "This drains your account with me, and then some. You gonna pay the balance the usual way?"

Ames grit their teeth and remained silent for a moment. Just as I was about to say something that I might regret, the cat nodded curtly. "Fine. But you'll have to send them over after the expedition. And if I die, they can too for all I care."

The wolf shrugged. "You're a survivor. I trust you to save your own hide first and foremost." He brought out a series of packages wrapped in some kind of thin vines. "Contact me when you're back." Something about his dry tone implied that he would know even if he wasn't informed by Ames. I was catching on quickly: This was the sort of man to have eyes and ears in a lot of places, particularly in somewhat seedy clubs and bars such as The Spastic Vole.

Not another word was shared between them. Ames passed half of the packages over to me, and I quickly stowed them in my backpack. The feline stowed away their half, gave Malachi a curt nod, and then led me back the way we came.

"Can I assume those were poisons?" I asked, once we were somewhat closer to civilization. I couldn't help but allow a slight tone of distaste to creep into my tone.

Ames didn't seem to care about my feelings on this particular matter. "Two of them, yes. Another is a healing and pain relief drug. It can be addictive however, and must be used in moderation."

I grunted. "And the 'usual way' that you plan to pay him?"

The feline sighed. "He has clients in an out of town on a regular basis. I entertain a select number of those clients in bed."

I nodded. "I figured as much." I tried to keep my tone neutral, but possibly didn't succeed.

Ames pressed, "You don't approve? You can call me a whore you know, you wouldn't be the first."

"I never said that."

The cat practically snarled at me, "I enjoy sex. I'm good at it. And if that particular talent helps me to keep the Vole open, I'm going to use it."

I remained calm in the face of Ames' anger, "I'm not belittling you."

Ames pushed me up against one of the cave walls, and put that fuzzy white muzzle right in my face. "Good, because this is my city, and you're just a guest here. It isn't your place to pass judgement on our ways. Bad enough I have to babysit without you getting out of line."

"If I'm being a bad boy, maybe I deserve a spanking."

The slightly bewildered expression on the were-cat's features was quite satisfying. Ames grumbled and then took a step back, freeing me from being pinned against the cold stone.

I murmured, "It's your life Ames, I'm just trying to understand it."

The feline nodded slowly. They took me gently by the shoulder and led me back out of the cave system. The sun was doing its best to cook away the clouds above Ice House. So far it had turned the snow into a light hail, hardly an improvement.

Rather than make our way back to The Spastic Vole, Ames lead me south, towards the huge greenhouses that helped to provide food for the locals. If I had any doubts that these structures were summoned by magic, close inspection laid those doubts to rest.

The front of the structure had no door as such, just a rectangular gap. Wooden frames had been constructed just inside and outside of the greenhouse, and thick carpets hung down to provide a sort of barrier between the outside air and the inside of the building. As I ducked under the first set of rugs, I glanced off to one side. Impossibly, the glass wall was about half a pace thick.

Once we walked into the place, the sheer absurdity of the existence of such a thing struck my mind. It could only be created through the ancient magical building rituals performed by the northern Elves. Tons of thick, perfectly formed and perfectly clear glass encased us. It was over two hundred paces east to west, and over one hundred north to south. The only gaps in the structure were the east and west entrances, and a small square gap in the very center of the roof. A spiral staircase led up to the gap, so that the workers could clear any snow or debris off of the roof.

"It allows for proper airflow as well as maintenance. We even have gutters. The stairs actually spiral around a pipe that we use to collect fresh water when it rains or snows."

I quickly shifted my gaze back to ground level to see who had addressed me. Standing before us, garbed in a bright orange robe and open toed sandals, was a blonde elf. He was short for his race, and dare I say quite a bit more friendly and outgoing than the elves I had encountered thus far.

Ames asided, "He's not a mind reader, he's just been answering the same questions and giving the same tour for twenty years."

The elf shuffled right up to the feline. He stood on tiptoes to kiss the cat on the cheek. "Twenty three now. And with nary a complaint. It's good to see you Ames."

She returned the gesture with a little nuzzle across the elf's left temple. "Good to see you, hierophant Petrioth."

The man dropped back to his normal height, weight rocking back to his heels. "Peter is fine, please." A hand was extended in my direction next. "And this is?"

I quickly took and shook the proffered hand. "Sorch, sir. Might I say that this place is amazing?"

I still hadn't gotten used to that reaction. The surprised, often pleased or bewildered reaction when someone hears an orc speak in complete sentences. Peter's face went through half a dozen levels of surprise and amusement, before settling on a broad smile.

"And you are perfectly welcome to tour it, my dear Sorch. Please, both of you, walk with me for a while. I'm just checking up on the little ones."

As we walked, the hail could be heard 'tick'ing off of the thick glass. Hierophant Petrioth's 'little ones' were potatoes. As he explained, "Each greenhouse is assigned a crop that they should focus upon over a two year period. Other than the small herb gardens you see dotted around the place, everything in here is potatoes. We use vertical planting tricks with certain crops to increase yields. For example, you'll see that we are building wooden potato 'towers' all along the edge of the greenhouse. When the plants poke through, we add another layer of soil, which makes another layer

of potatoes grow, and so on. We need to make very efficient use of space, since we have a whole city to feed.”

I couldn't help but smile. The elf reminded me of Shaman. They shared the same enthusiasm for nature. Shaman would have loved the duality of this place. Outside was frigid and hailing, but in here you would swear it was a warm summer's day. Outside was lifeless, but inside it was teeming with plants and worms and insects. I realized that I was missing what the elf had to say, and made an effort to hear the end of his speech.

“When our two years of potato farming is over, we'll shift to carrots, and then beans, and so on. With the proper fertilizer processed from the city's sewers and garbage, the soil is kept in peak condition for our chosen crop.”

At this point, we were in a more secluded corner of the greenhouse. Potato towers surrounded us on two sides, and crates of potatoes ready to be shipped were piled up behind us. Ames asked, “Peter, will you be able to keep shipments up to my staff while I'm away? I'll make payment in full upon my return.”

The small elf waved his hands, as in if batting away any lingering concerns. “Of course. Don't worry about a thing. Let them know that they should come see me if they have a rush on something, I'll coordinate with the other managers to cover any emergency shipments required. Oh, you're still available to pose for my next painting upon your return?”

The feline nodded. “Yes, I look forward to it”

Hierophant Petrinoth rubbed his hands together. “Excellent. The order has already given me permission to let you use the Autumnal robes. It will be lovely.” He flashed a smile to each of us in turn. “Well, I must attend to my duties. Please show yourself out the back when you're done. Del-Nekbenth's blessing upon you both!” He gave us a deep bow, and then wandered off.

Ames and I looked at each other for a moment. Then I said, amused, “You'll look good in orange.”

The fluffy feline smirked, sharp teeth flashing from just one side of their muzzle. “I will. But it's actually a big deal to them. Each druidic dioceses has a seasonal painting that they hang in their grand temple. I was flattered to be selected.”

I reached out to stroke the fur of Ames' neck. “They could hardly go wrong in selecting you as an example of natural beauty.”

I hadn't seen a were-cat blush until that moment. The inside of Ames' triangular ears turned a nice shade of beet red, and then folded back as in if to hide the reaction. “Thanks.” the feline rumbled. “Um. We should get going. The hail has stopped, but who knows for how long.”

As we were heading out the back door, as instructed, we were stopped by a greenhouse acolyte. The young human girl curtsied, and then presented a small package to Ames. “Compliments of the Order. May Del-Nekbenth bless you and keep you.” We thanked the druidic lass, and then ducked under the curtains to make our way back out into the cold.

Before we walked through the outside curtains, Ames took a moment to sniff the cloth covered package. Those feline eyes widened, and their pupils narrowed to thin slits. “Oh... oh my.” the cat murmured.

I blinked. “What's wrong, are you alright?”

Ames swallowed. "F-fine. This isn't just a normal package of herbs. I... it has catnip. It might be all catnip."

I frowned, then leaned in for a sniff. It smelled like old mint to me, nothing more. "Okay. Should I carry it for you?"

The feline quickly gave me the package. "Yes, that might be best for the moment."

I slipped the little bundle into my backpack, and then we made our way back to the Vole. The lunch crowd was just starting to arrive. Ames didn't have time to protest as I offered to help out in the kitchen once again. The cat had to quickly get ready for a matinee performance. I heard the whistles and catcalls from the rowdy crowd as I scrubbed pots and flatware. I felt a surge of something that I couldn't quite place. Envy? Jealousy? Maybe something else. I pushed it to the back of my mind and set about the task at hand.

When the midday rush had ended, I was more than ready for my afternoon nap. Ames wanted to blame my soporific habits on the fact that I was an early riser. But the cat knew full well that rest was required to recharge magical capacity.

I awoke to find Ames rummaging through my pack. My hazy mind slowly remembered: The cat's packages were in there. I grumbled and sat up slowly.

"Hello there sleepy head. Do your ritual stuff, then come join me for dinner. Same booth."

The cat punctuated the statement with a cheeky little tail flick, and then left me to sort myself out.

After meditating and casting my intellectual enhancement spells, I joined Ames at the table. The were-cat was chatting with their head chef. I took a moment to appreciate my new companion in their natural environment. The fluffy white feline was so relaxed just then; completely in their element.

The chef glanced up at me, and then excused herself. Ames treated me to a bright, toothy smile. "I've already ordered for us. Hope you don't mind. We had some extra meat on ice from the entre a couple of days ago, so I'm having Sylvia prepare something off-menu."

To be honest, the smells coming from the kitchen were driving me crazy. I would have eaten whatever was put in front of me at that moment. But I tried to be more suave than just admitting my voraciousness. "Oh? That sounds wonderful, thank you. Shall I get us some rolls from the back?"

Ames reached across the table and grabbed my hand in their paw to restrain me. "No! Rolls are on the way already. You're not working, you're done for the day. We leave in the morning. Time to relax."

I covered the cat's paw with my free hand. "Okay."

Emerald green eyes held my hazel eyes. There was a moment of comfortable silence. This time I knew that I was holding that paw, and I wasn't letting go. Ames treated me to a gentle smile, fangs mostly hidden this time.

The dividing curtain was drawn back so that Ames could keep an eye on both front and back of house. There were no obvious troublemakers tonight.

I murmured, "I know you had mentioned loving to adventure. But running a place like this must be quite intense. When the Vole is financially stable, will you actually end up doing this full time? You

seem to be a natural. At running this place and leading these people, I mean.”

Ames’ claws extended and retracted a few times so that I could feel the clawtips prick gently against my palm. “You’re right of course. Success might cost me some freedom, and I’d have to manage this place most of the time. That’s okay. I love running this place, and dancing. I even like fixing a lock or picking a chest open from time to time. But I think my vacations will still be adventuring, no matter how profitable this place is. Toby once said, ‘Living is what you do when you’re not tending to life.’ That really stuck with me. I don’t just want to be comfortable, I want to be alive.”

I squeezed the were-cat’s paw gently. “Shaman told me something similar. He said that if your life is just feeding an engine over and over again, that isn’t living, that’s slavery.”

My feline companion nodded in agreement. “A wise man, your Shaman. Right now, this is my engine. I’m rigging it so that, in time, it will be feeding me. Then I’ll be free, just like you.”

I broke eye contact. “I’m still a slave to copper and silver.”

Just then the rolls arrived, still steaming. They had already been sliced down the middle and coated in butter. I had the presence of mind to let go of Ames’ paw so we could eat.

After the servant left, the were-cat commented, “Everyone is a slave to money, Sorch. It might be more literal and urgent for you, but everyone has debts to pay or mouths to feed. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

That made me feel better, oddly. I grabbed a buttered roll and tore into it. Ames did the same.

After chewing a muzzle full of fluffy, buttery bread, the feline rumbled, “And I’ll share something with you. This expedition is hot. Normally we’re working off of old rumours and dusty tomes. Sometimes we get lucky, sometimes we don’t. But as of around ten days ago, a hunter reported strange activity in the area we’re going. Noise, vibrations in the ground. I don’t think we’ll have a boring time on this one!”

I wouldn’t have minded just finding a lost treasure deep underground somewhere. Bored and rich would be a fine result as far as I was concerned. But I forced a smile anyway and said, “Outstanding.”

Ames nodded in agreement. “I can’t wait really.”

We polished off the rolls just in time for the main dish to arrive. It was a plate of beautiful red-brown steak of some sort. I sniffed it, but this wasn’t cow or horse meat. We were each poured a glass of red wine as well.

Seeing my look of confusion, my companion supplied the name. “This is an elk steak on a bed of fried potatoes. Enjoy!”

And I did. The slightly gamey taste of elk went well with the light cider sauce. I hardly had the patience to cut it up with my knife, though I knew that exposing my swamp etiquette to Ames wouldn’t be very impressive.

I paused. I was trying to impress Ames? Our back and forth had been entertaining, but the cat’s job was to be entertaining.

“Ames?”

“Hmmm?”

I set down my utensils. “The sitting in my lap, the teasing. Is that just part of the job, or is that you

being friendly, or... something else?"

The feline smiled, showing bright white teeth. "Something else." my companion assured me.

I had to ask. "Why?"

The feline bought some time to think by popping some of the delectable meat into their maw. There was some thoughtful chewing, and then a shrug. "You look like you're a lot of fun."

I snorted.

"And..." the feline added, "You're unique. I may be a relative rarity in this world, but I can honestly say that I've never met anyone else like you. There might not **be** anyone else like you in the world, Sorch. The last genuine orc magi was a figure in ancient history. But you haven't let any of that go to your head. You're still sweet, and sensitive. That's quite attractive."

The number of compliments heaped upon me in just a few seconds was too much. I took a long pull of wine to collect my thoughts and hide my blush for a moment. "Thank you."

We both ate in silence for a while. Then Ames dropped their utensils to the tabletop and asked, impatiently, "Well?!"

I jumped a bit in my seat. "I'm sorry, what?"

The cat threw their paws up over their head. "This is the part when you tell me why you like me!"

I blinked. "Oh!"

"You are **so** bad at this."

"I am. I'm sorry. When it comes to relationships, there isn't this much ritual back in the swamp."

The were-cat tapped their claws on the table, waiting.

I cleared my throat. "Well you're beautiful of course, that goes without saying. And I like that you have goals. I have goals, and I think being driven is very attractive. But..."

Ames tilted their head to one side. "But?"

"But mostly I appreciate your candor. People are always trying to hide stuff and things. They're afraid feelings might be bruised, or they think it will be an advantage later on, or they just want to feel superior. But you say what you think, and that's incredibly attractive to me."

The feline smiled. "Well. Not half bad for a boy from the wetlands." I took that to mean Ames approved. I let out a half-held breath in relief.

We were mid-way through our meal when I noticed the cat sprinkling something into their wine. "Is that the..."

Ames glanced up at me, looking perhaps a shade guilty. "Catnip, yes. I figured I shouldn't take it on the road, and this is my last night here for a couple of weeks."

I smiled reassuringly, "Sure, go ahead."

The change that overcame the feline was quite dramatic. The strong wine was having a little effect on me, but to Ames the impact was magnified sevenfold. My companion alternatively looked like they were falling asleep and melting into their chair, or wide awake and hyper-alert.

I had to smile. “You really like that stuff don’t you?”

Ames licked their lips with that long feline tongue. “Y-yeah. It’s very relaxing. Harmless in the long term. No hangover like you get with alcohol.” The were-cat devoured their steak and potatoes voraciously. I was impressed.

“Does that catnip stuff enhance appetite as well?” I asked.

I jumped a little bit as I felt a soft feline footpaw running up and down my leg under the table. “It enhances **everything** dear.” was the rumbled reply.

We finished our meals in relative silence. I couldn’t help but make some fairly unmanly sounds as that feline foot wandered, of course. But I wasn’t complaining.

I continued to not complain when Ames shifted over to sit on my side of the small booth. I truly and steadfastly did not complain when the feline ended up in my lap with their arms looped around my neck.

With my arms encircled about the were-cat’s midsection, I gazed down at the smaller creature. “This restaurant has the best service that I’ve ever experienced.”

The cat sighed a little bit. “I’m glad you think so. However...”

“Hmmm?”

“I need to go dance soon.”

I growled. My teeth found the tip of one of those inviting triangular ears and nibbled firmly.

Ames squirmed and mewled. “Sorch! Stop. I can’t... I can’t be too worked up before I dance.”

I murmured into that twitching, captive ear, “You’re high on catnip and tipsy from the wine. I don’t think it’s safe for you to dance right now.” My arms squeezed the squirming creature in my lap, possessively.

The were-cat growled and assured me, “It’s safe to dance.”

I relented and gently helped the cat back to their feet. “Fine. You can dance if you want to. But I’m not helping you to get dressed afterwards.”

Ames winked at me. “I don’t think I’ll want to get dressed afterwards.” With a practiced half turn that included a dramatic tail flick, the feline padded to their dressing room in order to get ready for the show.

I flicked the dividing curtain closed. Slowly I finished my wine, feeling that pleasant burn spread from my belly to my chest, then throughout my entire body. As the show was starting, I paid a visit to the kitchen. I took a couple of damp hand towels and a small vial of oil, ferrying them into Ames’ dressing room and leaving them on the nightstand by the bed. Always best to be prepared.

By the time the feline joined me, the bed was turned down and my clothes were already in a pile alongside theirs. The cat quickly closed the door. I lifted Ames, and those nimble legs curled around my back. Taking this as a good sign, I held the fluffy white creature in my arms and kissed the cat, feeling that long feline tongue curl dexterously around my humanoid organ.

That night, I learned everything there is to know about the mysteries of were-cat anatomy.

Chapter 12

“It’s freezing and I hate you!”

That was Will’s comment to Rick every hour or so as we trekked across the high mountain valley to the northeast of Ice House. I couldn’t really blame the human for being annoyed by the bitter cold and biting winds. Three days of this cross country plodding was more than enough for any of us, truth be told. But we only had a day to go before we reached our destination, so things were looking up.

Our respite from this frozen hell happened every evening, just after sunset. Rick had a spell that summoned a zone of comfort for eight hours. Apparently there was a version of the spell that created an actual dome that one could see out of, but nobody could see into from the outside. However, our minotaur companion wouldn’t have fit inside. Instead, Rick’s version of the spell temporarily created a soft, mossy floor and an area of comfortable warmth. The ritual took a little over an hour to prepare and complete. That gave us time to patrol the area and see if there was anything worth hunting. Once the comfort zone was ready, the five of us had dinner. That was followed by seven hours of sleep, and a quick breakfast in the morning.

Today was the worst day so far. Light snow had followed strong winds, which had followed frozen rain. And it wasn’t even noon yet. Of the five of us, Ames was the best equipped to deal with the weather. Not only did the feline have a natural fur coat, they also had all of the gadgets required to make the trip bearable. Next best off was Toby, which is to be expected from a mountain of bovine-man flesh. The minotaur’s only issue was that he had to wear not only boots, but snowshoes. As the snow got deeper day after day, we were all forced to wear snowshoes. Last on the coping scale were the three humanoids, with all of our reliance on warm climates and the desire to live as far away from the frigid equator as possible.

I wasn’t any happier than Will. Not by a long shot. But I kept my complaints to myself. Adventure was the life I had chosen, and that sometimes meant getting cold, wet, and lost. We had only been lost once, to be fair, and Toby had us back on track in short order.

The Ice Cave, as we cleverly called it because it had been described as a cave made of ice, was noted in the journal of Private Timothy Vec. The private was the only known survivor of the elven expedition code named ‘Salt Mines’. Oddly, Private Vec was not an elf himself. He was a halfling bard that was tagging along to record the adventures of the elven company, in both poetry and song. The halfling noted the unwillingness of the elven troop to abandon their mission, even when it was clear that the supplies that were supposed to be stockpiled there had never arrived. He was told to go back to civilization while he still could.

Rick had picked up the bard’s memoirs in a family estate sale, along with a staff that he had hoped was magical. The staff ended up being garbage. But the journal turned out to be very interesting, indeed. It claimed that inside these ice caves was a vast salt mine that had been abandoned for decades. In cold climates, salt was a key industrial and military resource. It could be used to melt snow. That meant a far easier time making paths and building roads, in addition to any commercial value that the excess salt held.

As Rick and Will had explained several times, we might be the first sentient beings to set foot in these caves for over one hundred and twenty-five years. They expected that there might be surviving elven armor and weapons, assuming any of them were enchanted. And of course any

wands, staves, or preserved scrolls and spellbooks would fetch a healthy price as well. At this point I would just be happy to get there without anyone in the party killing each other.

We were travelling in the high valley between Tomath's Peak and Thunderscale Mountain when nature stepped in. Without any warning, the light snow turned into a blizzard. The intense wind and blinding wall of white brought us to an immediate halt. We were nowhere near anything that could be defined as shelter. We huddled together to discuss our options, needing to shout to be heard at all.

Rick yelled, "No time to prep for the spell, we'll be buried in half an hour!"

Ames pointed down. "We need to dig, make a quinzhee or igloo as best we can!"

I asked, "Like a dugout in the snow?" I had made more permanent shelters with the tribe, and one option was to dig into the hillside so that all you needed was partial walls and a roof. The thought of doing that with snow terrified me.

The feline nodded, "Yes, but fast, temporary! We need to keep snow off us and pack the walls as hard as we can."

Will turned his back to the wind and started casting. In seconds, a Flat Mule was hovering off of the ground. Rick said, "Hurry! We'll clear to the sides, if it gets too heavy the Mule will collapse!" The rate at which the surface gathered snow was alarming to say the least.

Immediately Toby, Ames, and myself detached our snowshoes and dove under the flat disk of force. The three of us started to dig. Up above, Will and Rick were using empty leather loot sacks to pack and compress the snow that they were clearing off of the disk. They shaped the snow into misshapen blocks that we could work with. It wasn't pretty or exact, but progress was being made.

Toby shouted when he reached bare earth. We focused our efforts on widening that hole. I was neck deep in snow before I felt that I was standing on something solid. Ames said, "We need to clear the bottom, pack the walls, and make a dome." The cat didn't sound very optimistic.

But I had a secret weapon.

After clearing a small area on the bare ground, I unhooked my pot from where it hung on my backpack, and set it down on the ground. "Don't get too close." I warned. "Blaze."

Toby and Ames got the idea immediately. The big minotaur equipped his shield and used it to compress the snowy walls in a gentle outward slope. The were-cat filled the cooking pot with snow before nimbly scrambling out of our hole. I summoned my Invisible Shield and followed Toby's lead. Of the mages, I was clearly the one with the most physical strength.

With warm water and a general source of heat suddenly available, our ability to craft the snow increased dramatically. Once a portion of the wall was compressed, we used water to help freeze it in place. The side of the pot could be used to help expand and shape the structure as needed. Those working above could take shifts; two of them forming and placing blocks, while the third huddled by the pot to warm up. When my Invisible Shield expired, Will took my place down below and summoned his own Shield, while I went up to help form more blocks and build the dome.

With the main body of the shelter created, the Flat Mule was moved away and dispelled. Below, they were digging out a broad escape tunnel that would also serve as an air hole so that my pot didn't melt our structure. The tunnel needed to be wide so that we had storage for our packs, keeping them out of the confined area below. Rick started to dig down from above, and helped to

pack and freeze the lip of the tunnel. We just needed to build the dome over the area of hard packed ice and snow that we had created.

Ames complained, "These blocks need to be more precise! We have to square them off. Maybe bring the pot up and we can melt them against the side?"

I shook my head. In a few seconds, I had a flaming short sword in my hands. For the first time all day, Ames smiled.

Under the feline's expert instruction, we quickly built up the main dome. There wasn't too much to create, the bulk of the structure was dug into the snow rather than built over it. With the compressed snow cut to Ames' exact specifications, it all fit together nicely. We quickly slid down the escape tunnel to join our companions. After taking out our blankets, we all transferred our packs to the tunnel. Finally we moved the pot as close as possible to the air hole, so that our dome didn't melt.

Five shivering adventurers huddled together under a shelter of ice and snow. None of us spoke about the blizzard raging above, which could potentially collapse the little dugout under its weight. Instead we bundled up and enjoyed the few minutes of warmth that the magic cooking pot would provide.

When the pot's enchantment fizzled out, Toby pointed at the device. "How many more times can you do that?"

I replied, "Two more times today."

The big bull sighed and nodded. "Then let it cool down some so that the air circulates. In a couple of hours we can activate it again to burn the snow away from the air shaft, and so on. Rick, will your spell work down here?"

The tall human nodded. "It should. If we're stuck here tonight, we'll be comfortable. It certainly doesn't generate enough heat to melt the walls."

There was nothing left to do except relax. We all drank from the pot while the water was still warm. Soon after that Will said, "Anyone who wants to get some rest, go ahead. I'll activate the cooking pot in a couple of hours, and then someone else can take watch."

As might be expected, Toby took up around half of the space available, even curled up as he was. That was fine though, sharing body heat was part of the plan. Rick and Will leaned on the minotaur's left side, while Ames and I curled up against his right. The small human who was on watch took out the bard's journal and started reading in the dim light provided by the air shaft. I decided to close my eyes. Sleep came quickly.

Suddenly I was floating high in the sky, looking downwards through the blizzard. It felt like a huge pair of hands was lifting me, giving me this new perspective. A feminine voice that I had never heard before spoke to me.

She asked, "What would you ask of me, Sorch Stonebreaker?"

I answered, bewildered, "I'm Sorch Stonebender, why do you call me..."

I was cut off by laughter, a sound so sharp that it sounded like ice shattering. "Today you bend, but tomorrow you break. Such is the way of all mortal things."

Suddenly, I knew. "You are Glogur's Bane. Omi-Suteth."

The voice turned cold, and with it so did my entire body. "Ah so you do know of me. And yet you willingly defy my edict. Are you not afraid?" Slowly my perspective changed, as in if I was being lowered into the storm.

I answered the goddess, honestly, "I was more afraid of living a life of nothingness. I was more afraid that my people would go hungry. Do you remember what hunger is?"

There was a long pause. This time the voice was gentle. "I know what hunger is, Sorch Stonemender. I would wish it upon noone."

Again, she took liberties with my name. "Why do you..."

"Tomorrow you break. But broken things can be mended. What would you ask of me?"

We were low enough that I could see the top of our shelter, now almost buried in the torrent of snow.

I tried to remember the words. "Shaman told me that Kenvunk was sorry for what he said to you."

Omi-Suteth said, softly, "He was angry at my punishment of Glogur. He said he didn't love me anymore."

"He's sorry. I don't know if he still loves you. But he's sorry."

The snow fell thick all around us as we floated down. I was nearly touching the shelter now.

"What would you ask of me, mortal?"

"I ask that you give us another chance."

I was lifted once again, experiencing the vertigo that comes with defying gravity in an impossible way. Tears cascaded all around me as the ground fell away. They crystallized and became like the snow, falling into the blanket of white below.

The goddess murmured in my ear, "Perhaps. Mend what you have broken, Sorch Stonebender. Then we shall see."

And with that she let me go.

The terror that accompanies imminent death by falling gripped me. My belly seized up as our dome of ice and snow approached rapidly. But rather than shatter it, or shatter against it, I flowed through the structure like sunlight through a window. Briefly I saw myself huddled in blankets, embraced by Ames.

Then I was back in my own body. I keenly felt the chill of having been held suspended in the storm, whether or not that experience physically happened. I was cold. So cold. I was certain that I would freeze to death.

But instead a warmth surged through my body. I was surrounded by soft white fur.

I woke slowly, wrapped in blankets, and wrapped again in a sea of Ames's plush coat. A Light spell had been cast, likely by Will, since our air hole was too clogged by snow to provide enough light for reading. I twisted around to look across the bulk of Toby's slumbering body. The small human was going through the journal without a care in the world. Apparently the man didn't perceive anything

that had happened to me, if there was any physical manifestation to speak of in the first place.

Clawed paws tugged absently at my hips, trying to get me to settle. I had roused my feline companion with my squirming. Turning so that I was nose-to-muzzle with the cat, I murmured, "Ames. I dreamt of you, of this moment, years ago. I think you saved me."

The were-cat cracked open one emerald eye. "More sleep please." was the mumbled reply.

I insisted, "It was a premonition. And Omi-Suteth spoke to me."

Ames groaned softly, "Tell her we're tired."

I squeezed the feline's shoulder. Both eyes opened.

I murmured, "Listen. I've been dreaming about you for years. Since well before I knew anything about the outside world. I just didn't know it was you until this moment. I don't know what it means, but I know you're important to me. All of you are. But in particular, you."

Ames propped themselves up on one elbow. Groggily, the were-cat commented, "Well, I'm glad. I am. And I feel some kind of connection, I honestly do. But we just met, so maybe save the whole 'fates intertwined' thing until the second date. What do you say?"

I grumbled.

The were-cat stroked my back, absently. "I'm not taking this lightly. It means something. But under the circumstances, we're not in a position to research or explore what exactly it all means."

I sighed a little. "Yes, you're right. Okay. I just wanted to let you know. Just in case."

The feline rolled their emerald green eyes. "Just in case? We've been in tougher spots before you joined our little troupe. With you along for the ride, we can handle this, and much more."

I wasn't going to get back to sleep. I took the time to refresh my intellect enhancements, and to meditate before my midday spell memorization. As I slipped free of Ames' grasp to go get my spellbook, Will called over to me, softly. "You can turn on the pot again Sorch, it's time."

I crawled up the escape shaft to gather some snow that I could fill the pot with. There was plenty of it. At least a foot and a half of snow had fallen in the last two hours, obscuring the air hole. I gathered a reasonable amount and made tight snowballs out of it so that I could roll our new water supply down the shaft. I managed to poke a hole through to open air, and I peered around. The wind was still gusting hard and it was still snowing, but not as bad as it had been when we were forced to take shelter.

The pot was filled to the brim with snowballs. "Blaze." I murmured, activating the wondrous device. Within minutes the water was simmering. I added some chicken bouillon that I had made from drippings in the Vole's kitchen. Once that had reached a full boil, I sprinkled in garlic powder, and added the dried carrot chunks. The aroma quickly filled our small shelter, and hungry adventurers were soon awake and alert.

As the carrots boiled and softened, I gave my friends the weather report. Ames looked relieved and commented, "That's good. It's a lot of snow, but if the squall is already dying down, it should be over in a couple of hours."

The taller of the two humans interjected, "Excellent, we can make the caves before nightfall if we really push." There was a chorus of groans and protests, but Rick wouldn't budge. He was the

designated expedition leader. It was his job to keep us on track and on budget, but more importantly, to make sure that we had enough resources to complete our mission and make it back home safely. Eventually we all agreed to make the effort, before crowding around the pot to receive ladles of soup in our tin cups.

When we were done eating, I studied my spellbook as the others made their own preparations. The small space got appreciably warmer with the pot blazing away for an hour. Coffee was brewed just before the duration ran its course, but I passed. By the time I was finished the pot was cool again, and people were starting to bundle up for the final leg of our journey.

Outside, the snow was coming down at a much more manageable rate. We marked the entrance to the shelter with a couple of thin wooden stakes, just in case we needed to use it on the way back and it was still intact. Toby joked that we wouldn't need the markers because he was going to 'turn this entire mountainside yellow' after having been cooped up for hours. Ames looked at him in disgust while the rest of us laughed.

The remainder of the journey passed without incident. The snow stopped falling entirely by late afternoon. We made it to the Ice Caves an hour past nightfall. The entrance that we discovered was a modestly sized hole in the mountainside. A wider bulge around a dozen paces from the entryway provided the perfect spot for Rick's Zone of Comfort spell. There was a collective sigh of satisfaction when the hour of preparation had finished, and the tall human's spell took effect. It was like standing on a placid hilltop on a warm spring day. We divvied up the watches into four shifts, and got some sleep.

I wouldn't say it was restful sleep. Real or imagined, several of us thought that we heard noises coming from an area deeper inside the mine. The thought was unsettling. If some creature or band of creatures had taken over the mines, they would very likely want to get out at some point, and we would be in the way. But other than the faint sounds, nothing else manifested.

When we moved south, away from the relative safety of the cave's entrance, Rick and Will used Light cantrips on the tips of thin wooden stakes. They served as effective and reliable torches that didn't shed heat. After just a dozen paces, the makeup of the walls and floor shifted from ice to stone. As we moved deeper into the mines, this bright white illumination revealed an architectural complexity that was beyond my initial expectations.

As I learned from Will, when you find a salt deposit, it is usually massive in scale. In this case, the mines were several hundred paces in length and at least two floors deep if the halfling bard's notes held true. Each passage and each room were carved in near-perfect right angles. We walked through square hallways into massive, towering rectangular chambers. One could see where square slabs had been cut from the walls, presumably to be processed outside of the mines themselves.

Exploring every nook and cranny of such a large area took two hours. We had to make sure that there were no secret or concealed passageways that could be used against us later. Another factor was vertical exploration. There were several areas that were multi-tiered, requiring one or more of us to climb up in order to check things out. We found nothing suspect or dangerous.

In the middle of the southern wall of the main chamber, a broad circular ramp curled downwards, connecting the first level with the second. We spiraled to the left, 270 degrees. This chamber was more confined than the last, perhaps thirty paces by fifteen. At the far end of the room, access tunnels forked off in three directions: West, northwest, and southwest.

Ames confirmed what the rest of us had heard periodically. "Some kind of noise up ahead. I can't tell

which tunnel it's coming from yet."

As it turned out, the noise couldn't have been coming from either the left or the right tunnels. Each of them terminated abruptly after around 50 paces. The perfectly square stone hall gave way to a chaotic lunge of limestone and salt. It was as in if a massive stalagmite had suddenly and violently thrust itself from the ground to block the passage. That kind of aberration happening once might have been explained away by a natural occurrence, but twice was a rather suspicious pattern.

"Something corrupt happened here." murmured Toby, looking melancholy.

Will reached up and patted his shoulder. "I agree big man. Let's be on our guard."

Ames took the lead, insisting that the rest of us stay at least a dozen paces behind. To most people, we were relatively quiet. To the feline we were like a herd of moronic elephants, bumbling around without a care in the world. Under Ames' instruction, the Light enspelled torches were kept in the very back of our group, directly behind myself and Toby. The two of us cast large shadows in front of us. We were still benefiting from the light somewhat, but we weren't blowing the were-cat's cover. The shadows were Ames' friend.

The party proceeded slowly up the central passage. Toby had weapon and shield at the ready, and I assumed that Ames was leading us by the tip of their own sword. Lit from behind as I was, I proceeded with caution. I double checked my footing before taking each step. Comparatively, we were well past the point where the other two passages had been blocked off. The mysterious sounds were getting louder; even the humans could hear them now. It was like someone was still working in the mines. Not cutting away the stone, but shifting slabs of already hewn salt-rock perhaps. It was a periodic sliding / grinding noise, the kind of vibration that ran through your heels and up the base of your spine.

Suddenly, Ames was back in our group, holding up both paws. We all stopped and crouched. The were-cat stepped back towards the darkness ahead of us, got to all fours, and crawled forwards. It was a long, tense five minutes before anything else happened.

Finally the feline appeared again, cobwebs in their whiskers. Ames took out a piece of chalk and quickly started writing and adding a crude sketch or two.

From what I could make out, there was a large room or cavern ahead of us with some kind of divide down the middle. Ames had found an isolated observation point high and to the right of this area that we could safely talk in. The notes said that there was some form of large creature deeper in the cavern, but it shouldn't notice us if we were careful. The were-cat made Rick and Will put away their lights before we set off.

We slowly crept up the passageway, eventually making it to the large chamber that Ames had described. It was much like the main chamber on the floor above, at least for the first fifteen paces. Then it was as in if nature had rebelled and decided to reclaim the man-made cavern. Eruptions of salt and stone pitted the walls. Stalactites and stalagmites randomly jutted from ceiling and floor, as in if placed there by a god of chaos. Puddles of water and slush filled the melon sized holes in the ground. Phosphorescent moss grew in large patches along the walls and ceiling, casting the entire turbulent scene in an eerie green glow.

The party walked up an incline to the right, just along the inside wall of the chamber. It was an even gradient, very likely made by sentient hands. This led up to what looked to be an office or observation post of some sort, complete with an old wooden door in surprisingly good condition. We

crept inside, seeing no sign of the creature that Ames had noted in their chalk diagram.

The room was five paces by eight paces, but tall enough that Toby could stand at full height. In fact, I could have stood on the minotaur's shoulders without bumping my head. There was a plain waist-height stone slab in the middle of the room. As we closed the door behind us, I quickly surmised why it had lasted for over a hundred years. "Elven magic."

I said it aloud, and my companions nodded in agreement. Because in the western wall of the room there was a metallic porthole hanging open. Behind it was a thick, circular, perfectly clear pane of glass. It was tough enough to have survived whatever natural and unnatural seismic shifts that had befallen the chamber beyond. There were 'spy hooks' above the port hole, where one could hang a blanket or heavy cloak. This allowed an official, or foreman, or jailor to look through the porthole and into the room beyond, without giving themselves away with the ambient light of their own room.

Rick dug into his pack for a blanket and made use of those hooks. He then stepped behind the hanging cloth to observe the room beyond. This allowed us to make use of the rusted but functional sconce, and light a mundane torch to illuminate the room.

Will postulated that this was the foreman's observation room and office. The slab would have served as his desk, and such a place would have needed a sturdy door for any kind of payroll activities. It was as good of a theory as any.

Ames took out quill, ink, and parchment to map out what we had seen so far. I was impressed with the feline's level of detail. For the very fine lines, the quill was set aside in favor of a sharp claw dipped in the black ink. By the time the were-cat was done, there was a floorplan accurate enough to use as the basis of a detailed escape plan.

Toby and Will discussed how long we would observe the next room, as well as the party's next potential move. I made myself useful, digging into Ames' pack for a brush. As the were-cat blew on the map to dry the ink, I brushed the cobwebs out of their whiskers and the fur of their muzzle. There was quite a bit of rumbled purring. I caught Will and Toby sharing a surprised glance. Apparently they had not guessed how close Ames and I had become in such a short time.

As I was putting the brush away, a muffled voice called out, "Will." The human hurried over and slid behind the hanging blanket, as Rick shuffled out of the way.

Whatever the smaller human saw made him say, "What in the infernal hells is that?"

The taller mage said, for the benefit of everyone, "I've never seen one in person, but I believe that would be a salt elemental."

Everyone had a turn peering through the porthole. I was last in line. What I saw made me question either my eyes or my sanity.

Around thirty-five paces distant, slowly shambling across the broken chamber floor, was a humanoid figure. But instead of curved features, everything about the thing was glassy and square. It didn't look particularly pristine; even at this distance one could see large chunks missing from its head and torso. Whether it was 'born' with those defects or something had damaged it was unknown to me.

I slid out from behind the blanket to join my companions, who were already deep in discussion. As the junior partner in this venture, I listened rather than spoke.

Toby was smiling. "We have the opportunity to discover who or what is raising these creatures.

Perhaps they can be reasoned with. Then we can restore the mines to their former glory.”

Will shrugged, “While that’s a possibility, there’s no real benefit to us if there’s still an owner of record. We don’t have any sort of contract or salvage agreement.”

Ames rubbed their chin. “If we were to cleanse this place, we could research the owner of record when we get back. It’s not like people come out here very often. Then we could strike a deal to clear the place out, wait a week, and report back.” Toby stared at the cat, looking a little saddened by that somewhat deceptive suggestion.

Rick chimed in, “I don’t know how valuable this place is. There are no roads in, no easy transportation. I’d say that we continue with our quest, and then we’ll see what opportunities arise.”

All eyes turned to me, as I hadn’t weighed in yet.

“Ummm. Before I weigh in with an opinion, does anyone know how to kill a salt elemental?”

The silence and thoughtful looks gave me my answer.

I shrugged, “I think we worry about how easy or hard the task might be first, then figure out exactly what the scope of our opportunity might be.”

The taller human nodded. “That’s a fair point and a reasonable course of action, I think. Let’s secure the room, keep watch out the window, and we mages can have a midday rest to prepare spells that we think might be appropriate to destroy something like that thing. Objections?”

There were none.

I took the first watch while the others set up defenses. That would allow the non mages to observe through the porthole while we slept and memorized an array of combat spells. The elemental that we knew about wandered in and out of vision for an hour, but other than that, I had nothing to report. Will took a half watch while the rest of us prepared bedrolls and discussed potential strategies. With nothing interesting going on, the three magic users bedded down so that we could refresh our spells with something more appropriate than travel and exploration oriented magic.

When I awoke, Toby’s big head was inches from my face. He murmured, “We have a problem.”

The minotaur ushered me over to the porthole and urged me to slide behind the curtain. There was something on the side of the chamber opposite to where we spotted the elemental. To be accurate, there were several somethings. Humanoid in nature. But they looked crystalline, almost sharp. The phosphorescent green light gave these new creatures an aquamarine color. They shambled like restless zombies. These things were quite a bit smaller than the salt elemental, but I still wouldn’t want to mess with them without a very good reason.

I slid out from behind the hanging blanket. “What are they?”

Toby murmured, “Frigid simulacrum. Imagine a zombie that was animated by the frost and ice invading their joints and bones. These are the kind of undead raised by an ice necromancer. I can feel the oppression of their evil from here.”

I glanced over at Ames, who wore a feline scowl. The cat remained mute, but was clearly not pleased.

Turning my gaze to the slumbering human mages, I murmured, “Go ahead and wake them up. I’ll brew some tea and we can discuss our next move.”

The discussion was animated, but we kept our voices down. The general consensus was that we could outrun a threat in this chamber, if it was immune to our influences. We needed a clear path back to the cave exit, at least until we were sure about our chances. The mages would prepare spells that revolved around impact, fire, and escape. We finished our tea and made preparations and memorizations. Infused by the caffeine and warmth, the five of us were packed and ready in no time at all.

There were four of the undead creatures shambling around to our left, on the south side of the large chamber. Both Will and Rick had Light sticks tucked into their belts, and our illumination announced our presence to the simulacrum. One of them raised an arm towards our group and opened its cold-mummified jaw in a silent scream. The other three turned their lifeless heads towards us, as if hearing the soundless cry.

The first thing that I noticed was their speed. They may have been exploring at a glacial pace, but when aroused to anger, they were able to lumber around fairly quickly. The second thing that I noticed was the vaguely elven designs of their tattered and rusted armor. Finally, the longswords that they were brandishing were still fairly solid. We would want to deal with them quickly.

I opened with Noon Sunlight, testing the theory that these dark creatures suffer when exposed to the light of day. Over half of the chamber was suddenly flooded with bright light. The good news was that no other creatures were within our line of sight. The bad news was that it had absolutely no effect on the undead, and they simply pushed forward towards our front line.

The difference in fighting styles between Toby and Ames was astonishing. Toby used his body and his armor to full effect, moving in to crowd the two undead foes he was facing. He almost never let them get a full swing, pushing forward with his shield, truncating their blows before they could build power. You could see him smiling, just waiting for the right moment to chop his foes down with that huge broadsword.

The were-cat, on the other hand, was like a dancer. The leathers wouldn't provide a lot of protection against a direct strike, so Ames relied on agility for the bulk of their defense. The feline faced off against one of the simulacrum, starting in a low crouch. By the time the creature's sword was arcing through the air, the cat simply wasn't there anymore. Ames had spun to the right and was already stabbing the frigid simulacrum in the ribs. It was a minor blow to the undead warrior, but it was the first of many to come. Parry and dodge, feint and backstep: These were the tools in Ames' arsenal.

The last of the undead approached Will, but it was met by a gout of fire streaming from the smaller human's hands, as his Fan of Flames connected. A fraction of a second later, a tight grouping of Magic Missiles cascaded from Rick's fingertips, piercing flesh and breaking bones. The undead creature seemed disoriented under the assault. It lunged forward, the tip of its longsword missing Will, who had stopped channeling his spell to throw himself to one side.

As the human and the undead creature both recovered from the attack, I made amends for my less than spectacular opening spell. My Force Bolt slammed the simulacrum into a large stalagmite, finishing the job that my fellow mages had started.

A few moments later, there was a satisfying 'crunch' as Toby shattered the skull of one of his two opponents. It was followed by a wince however, as the other icy zombie landed a blow across the left side of the minotaur's face. The thick jawbone did its job, but there was a spray of blood as Toby's flesh was split open.

Seeing their friend in trouble, Ames picked up the pace. A quick parry and riposte cost the undead

creature its shoulder socket. The next fumbling swing from the simulacrum resulted in it being disarmed. Clearly the were-cat had their foe well in hand.

Will had an angle on big bull man's enemy, and a series of Magic Missiles lanced out to pepper its side. I circled left to get an unhampered line of sight, and Rick circled right to get the same. We needn't have bothered. The creature dropped its guard for a moment, and Toby bisected it. As the undead fiend's torso slid away from its hips, Ames' short sword pierced the skull of the last cursed creature.

Rick hurried over to Toby, who fell to the ground clutching his face. Even through the blood, one could see the dull white of jawbone through the gaping cut. The tall human urged the minotaur, "Heal yourself, use it."

Tears were flowing from the bull man's eyes. This time it might have been as simple as a reaction to pain, though he might be equally upset that he let his guard down. It's hard to tell with minotaurs. It looked like Toby was going to protest against the suggestion that he use the healing power on himself. There was a sound from the back of his throat, but when he moved his jaw to say something, the pain stole his voice. The paladin relented, and closed his eyes to concentrate.

To see the healing of Aro-Remset up close was really something. Toby's hands started to glow. That aura seeped into the open wound to do its work. Before our very eyes, flesh stitched itself together. The pain melted away from the big man's features. All that was left of the grievous wound was a puffy red scar and a line in Toby's fur that was bare for the moment. There was still evidence that he had been hit of course. His armor and the ground were slick with blood. But looking at our friend, we might have assumed he suffered a minor sparring accident rather than the bone-deep wound that had been inflicted just a minute ago.

Ames wiped their friend's teary eyes with the back of one fluffy white paw. This resulted in a strained, somewhat breathless chuckle from the minotaur. "Is everyone else alright?" he asked.

We all piped in with reports of our good health as Toby got to his feet. Will and I policed the area, but found nothing of value on the bodies. There was a brief discussion as to how that went, and all agreed that a small band of these fiends wasn't too much of a problem, now that we've seen them in action. The minotaur admitted that his mistake was overconfidence, and vowed to avoid underestimating the frigid simulacrums again. We pressed on, making use of the faux-sunlight that my spell was still providing.

At the southern edge of the light field, a passage could be seen. It was strange. The salt stone was warped in places. It was as in if the passage, certainly hewn by sentient beings, was being reclaimed by nature at an unnatural rate. Walls that were perfectly square to the floor and ceiling suddenly became bumpy, as in if the stone had bubbled fluidly from the wall at some point. Then a few paces further on, it was squared off once again.

We explored the rest of the main room, Ames adding details to their map every once in awhile. Rick and Will switched to Light sticks when we moved out of the radius of my spell. In the lifeless white light, we saw another exit from the chamber to the northeast. This tunnel was far more uniform than the other, but no less disturbing. It was as in if a perfect semicircle had eaten through the rock. The domed tunnel was massive, easily four paces in radius. It was completely devoid of features... not a single stalactite or stalagmite, and bearing not even a scrap of moss. Disturbing, as I said.

Toby mentioned, "This one is sloping downwards slightly. Whatever created this was aiming for something just a little bit below us." I couldn't detect the grade of the passage, but one should

always trust a minotaur in mazes and caves.

Rick, our fearless expedition leader, made the executive decision. "Well. This one is closer. Let's start here." He truly was a font of wisdom.

We proceeded down the cold, sterile passage for a little under eighty paces before we saw anything new. Eventually the featureless passage opened into a natural cavern of salt rock and limestone. When our light started to shine deeper into the cavern, we heard a voice call out: "Oh, come in, come in! So rare I have visitors these days."

We proceeded with caution, seeing a light very similar to our own in the distance. As we crept forward, details started to come into focus. The magical light was from the tip of a staff... not a wooden staff, but one that looked to be coated in black stone. The holder of said staff seemed to be an ancient elf, seated atop a makeshift rock throne. Everything about the man was pale, from skin, to light amber eyes, to that wild mane of hair. He was flanked by two of those salt elementals that we spotted earlier. The elf's free hand was stroking one of them absently, as in if the creature was an overgrown housecat of some sort.

Seeing Toby in the lead, the wizened elf laughed. "A minotaur! So they've finally sent a rescue party, have they?" He peered over Toby's shoulder from his elevated position. "A ragtag group to be sure, but one needs native guides and... muscle, I suppose."

Will asked Rick, "Are we really ragtag?"

Rick answered, "We're not top shelf, buddy."

Toby cleared his throat and made introductions, "Greetings. I am Toby McGoldberg of Ice House, Paladin of Aro-Remset, defender of the Order of the Snow. We are a survey mission rather than a rescue mission, though if you require rescue then we are more than happy to offer assistance."

The old elf snorted, and then spat. The salt elementals stirred restlessly. "You can simply call me Salt, boy. And I do not require rescue, young thing. I do not wish to leave, and no force has been able to best me yet. I doubt anything will happen along that poses a significant challenge. Other than the Necromancer, of course."

Toby glanced back at me for some reason, possibly looking for guidance. I gave him a 'thumb's up', which Will had taught me to do when I wanted to encourage someone. Toby rolled his eyes and turned back to the ancient elf.

"We did encounter and slay some undead creatures in the room up yonder, sir. Might those be products of this Necromancer you speak of?"

The old man cackled and clapped his hands together, like a pleased four year old child. "Oh excellent. You've softened him up for tonight's battle. Perhaps the tide is finally turning. My children might march all the way down his throat and bury him once and for all. Then I can proceed with my quest."

Toby's look back at us seemed to effectively convey the message: 'Help me with this madman.'

Not seeing anyone else step forward, I cleared my throat and asked, "We see that your mastery of the element of earth is unquestionable, sir. As you don't seek to leave this place, might we assume that your quest relates to your magical pursuits?"

I regretted speaking almost instantly, because those pale amber eyes were now fixed on me. It was

quite unnerving.

Salt seemed surprised. "Things have changed since my retirement, if one such as you can surmise such things. But the answer to your question is 'yes'. You might assume that. And you would be correct, after a fashion. I plan to use the salt of the earth to melt the snow."

Ames chimed in, "You mean to create a road? Perhaps between here and Ice House? That would allow the mine to reopen and-"

The elemental cut off the were-cat in mid sentence. "No, no, no. I will use the salt of the earth to melt the snow. All snow. Everywhere."

We were stunned into silence. Toby started to say something, and then reconsidered. After a few seconds, he finally asked, "You can do that?"

The elven madman wiggled his staff around, causing the nearby shadows to dance around wildly for a few moments. "Of course! Well perhaps not all of it right away. I'll start close to home. My children will multiply and spread their salt all around. The land will go sterile, the ice will not form, and the earth will have won. Then we'll spiral out further and further. It will take time. But time, I have."

I scowled. "That would kill tens, if not hundreds of thousands of creatures. The runoff would be toxic and poison streams. Ice House and other settlements would need to be abandoned."

The elf shrugged. "Sure. But. No snow!"

Toby shot me a quick glance before I said something we might all regret. He turned back to the elemental and said, "We will go and examine this Necromancer you speak of. Can I assume that he resides in a place that can be reached from the other side of the main chamber?"

Salt snickered a bit. "Yes, yes. He's lived there since the original expedition. So intent on keeping those other fools alive that he never really noticed that little slip between life and undeath. Now he wishes to claim me, and I simply wish him to be out of the way." The ancient, mad elf shook his head. "Ah well. Go. You may need to butcher some more of his creations before you can speak to him. That would be such a shame!" He waved us off, like royalty dismissing servants.

We made our way back to the main chamber. My magical zone of daylight had faded. After a quick check around, we retreated to the safety of the observation room so that we could have a discussion.

Ames gave their professional assessment. "That guy is nuts."

I agreed with our fuzzy feline companion. "His plan is tantamount to mass murder or mass destruction, or potentially both."

Our golden brown fuzzy companion seemed uncertain. Toby sighed. "Are we sure that he has both the power and the will to do what he's talking about? Plotting destruction is an offense to the Order, but idle rambling is not."

Will and Rick had been conferring. Will said, "We think he could do it. At least the first part of his plan. He could set salt elementals loose in the wilderness and cause all manner of personal and natural destruction. Unsupervised, they would kill indiscriminately."

Rick added, "It might take years, but eventually everything between here and Ice House would be barren and scarred. The water supplies would be poison. One powerful and insane elemental left

to his own destructive ways for a decade? The damage would be unspeakable.”

Toby nodded curtly. “And the Necromancer? There’s no such thing as a good one of those, in my experience. These two apparently have some sort of feud going on.”

Will noted, “On a regular basis, for over a hundred years. And their next battle is to happen tonight, if you trust the word of Salt.”

Ames tilted their head. “I can try to sneak in and spy on the necromancer, if we wanted more intel.”

Our expedition leader considered the options quietly for a few moments. Then Rick said, “No. There’s no need. We can’t risk an army of frozen undead wandering the area any more than we can elementals. This ends tonight.”

Rick shared his plan with us, and we plotted out the fine details together. We would pit them against each other. Then when their forces were as depleted as possible, we would try to finish both sides. Ames’ highly detailed map came in handy, allowing us to incorporate exact distances and sources of cover into our plans.

We decided that Toby and Will would focus on the elemental, Ames and myself would focus on the necromancer, and Rick would fill in the gaps as needed. It wasn’t ideal. Toby would prefer to be fighting the undead of course, but Ames wasn’t really built to do damage to the salt elementals if the need arose.

After another rest session to prepare the spells that we would need for tonight, Will, Toby, and Ames made a trip back to the surface. They wanted to make sure that the escape route was still clear, that the map was accurate, and while they were at it they could gather fresh packed snow. That way we could conserve our water supply.

That left Rick and I to set up stuff and things for dinner. As I set the magical pot down on the stone desk, the tall human spoke to me in quiet tones.

“Sorch. I just wanted to thank you.”

I replied as I was taking out the dried herbs and peas to add to the soup. “Thank me for what?”

The human rubbed the back of his neck as he considered the most polite way to answer. “You wouldn’t be considered the most seasoned adventurer around. Your experience with the world outside of the swamp is all rather recent. And yet, you’ve pitched in for your share and much more, time and again. I don’t think I’ll have any trouble convincing these guys to bump you up to full share on the next run.”

I grinned toothily. “Thank you. You have my friend and mentor to thank for that. Shaman.”

Rick asked, “Yeah? I’ve heard you talk about Shaman. How did he help you become a good adventurer?”

I took out a couple of strips of jerky meat and my dagger. As I was cutting, I explained. “Shaman was an adventurer himself for a few years. Too curious for his own good. He would tell me stories of his travels all over the southeast, right up to the edge of the elven lands. His tales prepared me for this. And he pushed me out of the nest, so to speak.”

The human smiled. “Good for him. I hope we all get to meet him one day.”

I pushed back a little bit of homesickness so that I could reply, “I hope so too.”

The trio were back with a sack of compressed snow. They reported no problems with the escape route. Confident that we had done our due diligence, I fired up the pot and melted most of the snow for dinner. Toby had an onion that he wanted to use before it went bad, so that was chopped up and added to the herbs, peas, and jerky. All said, it was a fine soup. I boiled up the rest of the snow for tea, and then we took turns behind the hanging blanket, watching through the porthole.

As it happened, it was my turn to be the one who saw something. Undead figures were starting to gather on the left hand side of the large room. As if on cue, hulking shapes started to gather on the right. I gave a running count as the forces started to marshal for both sides.

“So in total I have four... yes, I think it’s four salt elementals. And about twenty of the undead. No sign of either mage yet.”

Behind me, on the other side of the blanket, I heard Ames say, “I’m glad we didn’t try a head on attack.”

Will said, “Fight smarter not deader.”

Toby commented, “That’s an awful phrase.”

I was more focused on the impending clash of forces than the banter in the room. Each side was standing close to their respective walls. It was almost like a game board. I called over my shoulder, “What happens to these armies if they lose their leader?”

Toby answered. “Depending on how strong the enchantments are, they will either fall apart or go rogue. I wouldn’t count on the former, but it will be a happy day if killing the controller kills the beasts. Needless to say, let them pound on each other as much as possible.”

My shift ended before anything more interesting developed. I jotted down some notes in my journal as Ames used their keen eyes to monitor the situation. Once I finished writing, I closed my eyes and did my best to relax.

“It’s happening.”

The tense feline rumble jolted all of us to full awareness. Weapons were readied, gear stowed, and boots laced as the were-cat explained the situation.

“Salt appeared first, and the elementals started to shamle forward. Then the necromancer, who could be Salt’s twin brother for all I know - they certainly look alike - emerged from his passage. The undead are moving to meet them in the center of the room. They’re both casting spells and-”

Ames never finished that sentence. At the same time, the thunderous sound of a Lightning Bolt and the rumble of what sounded like an earthquake shook the room.

“Okay.” the cat’s voice was shaking a bit. “Two of the elementals were hit by lightning, they were damaged. Some of the undead were just impaled by an eruption of stalagmites and stalactites. They’re clashing now. Salt just conjured and hurled a bunch of stones the size of my fist at the simulacrums. Some of the fallen zombies just got back up, the necromancer reanimated them.”

Rick said, “Okay Ames, get out of there and get ready. Listen for whatever the next volley is, and we go right after. Take the wide route, stay out of the main melee. Our goal is to kill the mages, not the pawns.”

Toby cracked the door open a fraction so that we could just push through when the time came. We didn’t have to wait long. Over the din of melee we heard a kind of shattering explosion, presumably

Salt turning a slab of rock into deadly shrapnel. Whatever the necromancer did was lost under that wave of pressure and noise.

Ames and myself lost sight of the others almost immediately. We sprinted down the ramp past the entryway. The pair of us charged south, hugging the wall as tightly as possible. One of the undead that was serving as a rear guard did notice us, however. The simulacrum pointed towards us and opened their half rotted jaw in a silent cry of alarm. Apparently the necromancer 'heard' his creation, and he spun to face the two of us.

I skidded to a halt and started casting quickly, having already palmed the component from my pouch as we ran. The bolts of acid struck the undead fiend along the chest and pelvis. It quickly shambled towards me as some of the frozen flesh and brittle bone started to melt away. The way was clear for Ames. As the cat nimbly kicked off the wall to change direction, a Fireball blossomed somewhere behind us and to the right. That was either Will or Rick, or both.

The necromancer was calmly casting as Ames changed direction and made a beeline towards him. He finished with the were-cat less than ten paces away. There was a sudden bolt of darkness that seemed to pass right through my feline companion. Ames crumpled, as in if all of the cat's bones had turned to rubber.

I screamed, "No!" Rather than sidestep the charging zombie, I stepped forwards as I ducked. It's sword was uselessly high, and the stupid creature tumbled over my back as I straightened to my full height. With a disdainful glare over my shoulder, I cast a Force Bolt at it. The frigid simulacrum's chest caved in, and it stopped moving. I stalked towards my living foe, hatred in my eyes.

Ames had manage to crawl up to the spellcaster and grab at a boot. The evil mage launched a sharp kick at the were-cat's leather clad ribcage, sending my friend rolling away with a weak wince of pain. We started casting at the same time, him holding a skeletal doll of some sort, and myself bare handed. His gestures were elaborate and foreboding, while mine were tight and jabbing. It came down the choice of spell. Simple was generally shorter.

My tactic was very simple.

The sphere of Silence struck a target who was quite willing to give up all resistance. Ames was the epicenter of the spell that literally struck the necromancer speechless. There was a moment of confusion in the elf's pale eyes as his casting fizzled.

I was already quite drained, not able to reason at the highest levels, but my next move was still calculated. The necromancer couldn't hear the bellow of rage as I charged him. But he certainly felt the force of an orc tackle, forced to absorb the impact of someone nearly one and a half times his own weight.

I didn't let the eerie silence bother me as my right hook shattered the elf's nose. I didn't allow the pain of bruised knuckles to stop me from punching the bastard right in the throat. But the bleeding, gasping fiend did stop me. With a strength that was completely unnatural for such a frail body, the necromancer grasped my wrists. He forced my arms up and back, slowly. I bellowed into the silence and tried to surge forward again, but only managed a stalemate. Eventually my spell would wear off and he would be able to summon help. I cast my gaze about, looking for some way to get free, to end this quickly.

The blade that slipped into the elven mage's arm surprised us both. Ames, stretched out to full extension on their belly, had landed a blow. It was a weak thrust, and a minor wound at best. The

gouge to the upper shoulder didn't even cause him to loosen his grasp on my wrists.

But it did deliver the poison.

Slowly the necromancer's features twisted, as the pain and fever overtook his body. Already somewhat dazed from my blows to the head, he wasn't mentally or physically ready to fight that venom. Muscles spasmed, and my hands were released. A haymaker to the jaw sent the evil creature into the realm of unconsciousness. A slow, deliberate sword thrust from my prone companion pierced the ancient elf's neck, sending him at last to the land of the dead.

I rolled to my feet as the Silence upon Ames expired. Looking behind us, I saw only chaos. The salt elementals were half melted, half rubble. Much of the undead army was either destroyed, or scorched and useless from all of the missing limbs. I reached in my pouch for some spider silk when I noticed two of the ice zombies staggering through the smoke and the phosphorescent glow of moss. My Web pinned them to a stalagmite. The remainder of my excess intellect was drained away. I was a creature of instinct now.

By instinct, I hurried to my companion's side, and carefully helped Ames with whatever they were doing; in this case sheathing the poisoned sword. Then I half dragged, half carried the feline to the eastern wall and hoped that the rest of the group had fared well. A minute later, three figures stalked through the smoke, laying to waste the remainder of the crippled undead army with Magic Missiles, Fans of Flame, and the flash of a broadsword.

I called, "Toby! Help!"

The largest of the three figures pivoted towards my voice. He lumbered over quickly. The very mortal blood staining his weapon told me all I needed to know about the fate of Salt.

"Dark bolt. Ames weak."

I helped to hold the semi-comatose cat upright as the minotaur examined them in the moss-light. The lack of physical wounds and my primitive description of what happened told the paladin all he needed to know.

A giant golden brown furred hand grasped my shoulder. "I can do a little, but not much. Ames will need time to recover. It was negative energy, the tool of necromancers."

At the time, the words danced through my head and seemed to fall out without much traction. I watched, mutely, as the big man set down his sword and invoked the minor divine healing spell, calling upon the grace of Aro-Remset. Then he did it again, channeling the rest of the power that the day would grant him. Ames managed to murmur something to our horned friend. He nodded, and fished a couple of coca leaves from the cat's belt pouch. He popped them into the were-cat's maw, where they were slowly pulverised by those sharp teeth.

In the back of my mind, I knew that the paladin could invoke the laying of hands tomorrow morning, and that was likely to have a greater effect. But that didn't stop me from clutching Ames' back to my chest tightly, and refusing to let go. Toby just nodded at me, picked up his sword, and then rejoined our human companions to secure the area.

I don't remember the gathering of loot from both Salt's cavern lair and the necromancer's chamber. I guess that they left me to guard the weakened Ames rather than press me into duty. I vaguely remember retreating to the large room on the first floor to enjoy the taller human's magically invoked zone of comfort and bed down for the night. I remember the irritation I felt when Will and Rick urged me to prepare a full suite of enhancement spells the next morning, making use of my

amulet to kickstart the process. It meant being dragged away from Ames, but Toby promised to keep watch over the feline and invoke all of his healing.

The ritual of sacrificing copper, and eventually silver, brought my mind back from the brink. By the time I had rejoined my companions, Ames was sitting up and joking around with Toby. Relief washed through my body and mind, like cool aloe vera flowing over a sunburn. I smiled broadly. "Welcome back."

The were-cat stuck their tongue out at me. "Not all the way back yet. You have to carry me."

Rick clarified, "We all have to carry some of Ames' gear, and the loot. There were plenty of materials to rig a litter, which you and Toby will help to slide. If our shelter survived, we'll have an easy day. If not, we'll need to push a few hours into the night. I'm sorry folks, but there are food considerations. We'd be cutting it close if we spent an extra day here, and then ran into yet another emergency on the trip back to Ice House."

The tall human then turned to me and murmured, "I know skipping our midday rest will slow your recovery as well. I promise, by tomorrow we'll be back on track."

I shrugged it off. "I'm more worried about choking down cold jerky for lunch." As long as I was at a certain threshold of intellect, things were more than bearable. Ames was on the road to recovery, and that was what mattered most to me at that moment.

As the sun was setting, we reached our destination. Our tough little shelter had survived, and looked none the worse for wear. After a day of laying on their back, Ames insisted on making their own way down. There was a little uncontrolled sliding, and landing heavily on a slightly bruised feline rump. But the were-cat was pleased to have made it down via their own efforts. The rest of us joined the cat, and took up familiar positions for the night.

One of the most important adventuring rituals took place before we went to bed: The counting of the loot.

Both spellbooks had been recovered, though the necromancy book wasn't of any use to our party. The only two spells that didn't involve the dark arts were ones that Will and Rick already knew, and could teach me when I was ready. Salt's book was more interesting, but I had to admit that much of it was above my head. Theories and techniques were discussed that I hadn't mastered yet. But there was one spell that I would ask about, once we were done with the counting.

There was plenty of coin to go around, as well as a pair of ornate golden goblets. Salt's black staff had been shattered under Toby's vicious assault, sadly. My interest was particularly piqued when a magic ring was discussed. But Will quickly mentioned, "Toby thinks it's evil, and I would have to agree. It's likely a necromancy aide of some kind."

Rick said, "However, that means we get a bounty. We'll likely be paid for both the ring and the necromancy book. They're considered forbidden arts by the University, and their return will earn us a hefty reward."

I raised my brows. "So that means soon after we return..."

The tall human nodded. "We all get free passage to the Arcane University, and we'll be their guests for the week. I say the week, because I assume that you'll want to take your entrance interview and assessment. There is a small group of hopefuls looking to take the entrance exam in a few days. You're alright with the timing?"

I answered without hesitation. "Yes."

Toby glanced at Ames. "If you have other things to do, we can arrange to meet you back in Ice House."

The feline shook their head. "I assume that the teleportation will take a couple of days to arrange. As long as we can split what we earned already, two days will be enough for me to settle up all of my debts and place orders for the next month."

I nodded, "And enough time to arrange for tithing." Toby and I shared a glance. As we had discussed, a portion of his treasure went back to his Order, and a portion of mine would be sent to Shaman. The paladin promised to help me find a way to get the money back securely, understanding the solemn weight of this kind of an obligation.

Will smiled. "Excellent. Nobody will be disappointed in the final figure, I assure you. Let's get some rest."

Ames popped three more coca leaves into their muzzle, to boost their recovery and help numb the pain and weakness. Before I joined the feline in a tightly wrapped blanket, I caught Rick's attention. "I'd like to be the one to carry Salt's book on the trip back. There's a spell in it I want to try to master. It's advanced, but after tomorrow's morning rituals, I think I can make the attempt."

The human tilted his head. "One that we don't have available? Which spell is it?"

"Stone Shape."

Rick laughed a little. "Sorch Stonebender. Of course. It explains the block of clay that we found in his material components. I'll hand it over to you and you can start working on it when next we camp."

We all tucked in for the night. Under the blankets, Ames started to kiss me. At first I was surprised that the feline wanted to fool around. But their intent was actually to share some of the crushed coca leaves by sliding their tongue into my maw. I suckled gently until that raspy feline organ withdrew. I swallowed. The taste of coca was overwhelmingly bitter, but with a gentle numbness that wasn't unpleasant. The were-cat explained that it would be a few hours before I would feel any effects, and the two of us fell asleep quickly. I had to admit, in the morning I was feeling none of the usual aches and pains from combat and travel. I had renewed energy. Ames knew their pharmaceuticals.

Thankfully, there were no more disasters on the long trip home. Ames was walking again by the end of the second day. On the night that we arrived back at the Spastic Vole, I had managed to cast my first Stone Shape spell. I turned a large polished stone into a granite ring, which just happened to fit Ames perfectly. The gift was well received, if our subsequent nocturnal activities were any indication.

Chapter 13

I just had to clarify, “So Toby, you’re saying that I can send my share back on the caravan with The Magic Shop’s return shipment.”

“Yes.”

“And they’ll take it to Joel at The Deviated Course in Limt.”

“Indeed.”

“Who will give it to his orc ship captain friend...”

“Correct.”

“And within a month it will end up in the hands of Shaman, without anyone else in the tribe knowing?”

“Yup!”

“And this costs me...”

“Twenty percent of whatever you’re sending, minimum of fifty gold sent.”

I considered. “My share right now is around 83 gold, but we **expect** that the bounties will be fairly lucrative. If I just keep three gold worth of copper and silver, and send 80 back, 64 will get into Shaman’s hands. All within a month.”

Toby nodded. “That’s about the size of it. So?”

The numbers worked. That much gold could make real improvements back home, as long as Shaman was careful and kept the Chief out of the loop.

“Done.”

Toby made the arrangements, and I silently bid goodbye to my profits. I was gambling on the generosity of the Arcane University now. The necromantic bounties that they were offering were supposedly quite lucrative. But if they turned the bounty down, the legitimate market for necromantic items was rather small. It could be a while before we saw any profit. I was alright with that.

We had gone our separate ways for the last two days, only regrouping to have dinner and share progress reports.

Will was working on finding out who, if anyone, owned the mine. He said that in the worst case scenario, we would get nothing more from our efforts. In the best case scenario, the government would ask us to make a salvage claim on the mines, and we could potentially own them. Not that any of us knew what to do with a mine, but it was an interesting concept.

Rick was being boring. He finished up The Magic Shop’s business and arranged for the return shipment of the orders that he had placed in Ice House. He also packed up and shipped the expedition’s remaining treasures. The minor magical items would stock the shop’s shelves, which is how the humans turned a profit after absorbing all of the up front costs.

Toby had spent time with his fellow Paladins within the Order of the Snow, made his tithe, and

started to go over plans for the upcoming one hundredth anniversary celebration of the opening of the Arcane University. There would be parades and magical demonstrations in every major city in the world. There was a lot of work to be done, but Toby was happy to help.

In addition to ordering stock for the Vole, Ames had debts to pay. Some of those were not repayments of money, but rather... physical favors. It was a busy and exhausting two days for the feline. I made myself scarce so as to avoid any potentially awkward or jealous moments.

But I did get to see the were-cat pose for Hierophant Petrinoth's painting. It was beautiful, tasteful. And the feline looked spectacular in those orange ceremonial robes.

The rest of the time, I availed myself of the small public library that Ice House had built a couple of decades ago. It kept me out of Ames' hair. The first night, the Temple of Aro-Remset was nice enough to offer me a bed, at Toby's request. The second night, I snuck in to Ames' room after midnight. The feline was bedraggled and exhausted from all of the... debt repayment. The cat didn't even stir as I slipped into bed and fell asleep.

Morning came far too soon. After getting cleaned up, we packed our gear and joined the others for breakfast. Our teleportation had been arranged for mid-morning. Everyone else looked excited as they munched on bread and fried eggs. I was terrified. I had never been to the Arcane University, I hadn't ever teleported, I had never been judged by masters of magic, and of the handful of elves that I had met up until this point... I had killed two of them. Needless to say, I didn't eat much.

As we finished up, I asked Rick what I should bring. He said, "As an adventurer, you should always pack as in if you were going on an adventure. Because you never know when one will pop up." I took his advice to heart.

We trekked to the temple of Omi-Suteth as a group. The brief time away from each other really did wonders. There was no snapping at one another, no sarcastic comments. Instead there was joking and camaraderie as we made our way to the rear courtyard of the Temple of Magic.

A greeter, flanked by two pike wielding guards in chainmail, was waiting for us by the tall iron gate at the rear of the temple. He was quite pale. The man was dressed in a dark blue tunic and cloak, and he had an impeccable black handlebar mustache. To my surprise he looked directly at me and said, "Welcome Sorch Stonebender!"

I jumped. "Oh, h-hello."

There was a long pause. It was uncomfortable for me, but didn't seem to phase the greeter. In a smooth baritone voice he said, "You've been invited to teleport to the Arcane University and bring along four of your companions. Your itinerary is that of an interviewee for future attendance, while they collect a bounty and either relax or attend to school business. Is that accurate?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Four grins met my gaze. They weren't going to be any help. "Yes, that sounds accurate. We've made preparations for a one week stay."

"Then your itinerary matches our perfectly, Sorch Stonebender. Please proceed to the Circle of Transport. Have a lovely time."

The back gates swung open suddenly and soundlessly. The guards parted and backpedaled until they were on either side of the rear entryway. Our greeter bowed and stepped out of the way. I didn't move until Toby's meaty hand propelled me forward.

I murmured to Rick, "Why is this Temple of Magic dedicated to Omi-Suteth, when yours in Limt is

dedicated to Vinara?”

Rick murmured back, “Ah. Vinara is one of the New Gods. That suited Will, and eventually suited me. Omi-Suteth is an Old God. More powerful in some ways, but less flexible. The New Gods tend to be about change and progress. The Old Gods tend to be about stability and tradition. Anyway, the Arcane University uses temples of both Omi-Suteth and Vinara in various cities, depending on which is larger.”

I nodded, then focused on my surroundings as we walked. There wasn't much to look at, truth be told. A well kept lawn framed the simple stone path that led to only major attraction: An oversized white gazebo. At the center of the painted wooden gazebo was an inlaid copper circle. The circle was covered in runes and sigils. I couldn't even hazard a guess as to what half of the runes meant. We all stood in the middle of the copper circle and waited.

After a minute, I cleared my throat and asked, “Am I supposed to say something? Do something?”

Will shook his head. “No, they see us. As soon as the destination is ready, we'll be transported.” He pointed off to the side. What I saw nearly made me fall over.

Just to the east side of the gazebo, there was an eye. Just an eyeball, floating in mid air. It was attached to nothing. It had no blood or veins; in fact there was nothing gory about it at all. It simply existed. This inexplicable lidless eye watched the five of us without any obvious malice. It seemed to be waiting, just like we were.

I asked, slowly, “Rick. Is that one of those spying eyes?”

The small human nodded. “If you recall the tale of Sir Rhoaden Beleafast, and how the mages attempted to spy on what was left of his kingdom, this eye is the exact same thing that they used. It transfers an image of what it sees directly back to the caster's mind, from any distance. But it travels the same speed as a man would on foot. Handy to be able to cast the scrying spell here, then teleport home to monitor things in safety and comfort.”

I was about to reply, but we were no longer there.

Reality flickered. One moment I was standing under a gazebo on a chilly day in Ice House, and the next moment I was standing in a large reception hall. There was no feeling of sickness in the pit of my stomach, no lightheadedness, none of the symptoms that I had feared. I was simply elsewhere.

This particular 'elsewhere' was awe inspiring. I allowed myself to be ushered off of the huge inlaid copper plate and the elevated marble teleportation platform. After walking down a short ramp, I was allowed to gawk at my surroundings... like the tourist that I actually was.

The reception hall was three stories tall and seventy five paces across. On the ground level there were stalls surrounding the central platform. To the right seemed to be official University stalls: Information booths, recruitment for extra curricular activities, booths for organizing volunteers and internships, and the like. On my left there were sponsored merchants selling everything from books, to magical trinkets, to clothing, to snacks.

I expected the atmosphere to be somber and stuffy, but it was just the opposite. There was an infectious energy about the place. All three floors seemed to be bustling with students, parents, representatives of religions and governments, staff members, merchants, and entertainers. People were celebrating their participation in magical education.

Will explained, speaking loudly to be heard above the din, “This is the reception hall and central

meeting place. As you can see it's open to all sorts. Anyone who has official business or a University sponsorship is welcome. Public administration manages all this. The theory is that students should be allowed to interact with normal people in order to be ready for the real world after graduation."

We dodged a group of halfling children on a field trip. They were being chased by their poor bedraggled teacher, who seemed to be way out of her element.

Will chuckled, and then continued. "The four wings of the Arcane University are restricted to those with educational or internal interests. The South Wing is where we're heading now. It's the dormitory area: Beds, kitchens, cafeteria, baths and the like. The North Wing is the staff wing: Meeting halls, high ritual chambers, offices. The East Wing is the apprentice section: Classrooms for new students, unrestricted libraries. And the West Wing is the advanced students section: Classrooms meant to contain more powerful magics, restricted libraries, and what have you."

I nodded to Will. At this point I was just following the group, who seemed to know where they were going. We stopped by the Applicants booth to pick up my identification. It was an ankle chain made of silver. The young were-wolf lass who was manning the booth asked if everyone else remembered to bring theirs, and everyone responded in the affirmative. I never even noticed, but I suppose I wasn't in the room when Ames got dressed this morning and we were all wearing boots that would hide such jewelry. Even Toby had boots on, despite his disdain for footwear. I took off my left boot, and the purple robed canid attached the ankle chain. I slipped my footwear back on and then laced back up. The were-wolf attendant said, "You're all set mister Stonebender. If you have any questions, come see me again." I swore that the buxom lupine winked at me. Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

We left the open area, walking south through broad granite hallways. Every twenty paces or so there was a 'torch', but the light wasn't magical as I expected. Nor was it lit like a normal torch. I sniffed as I passed one, and for a moment I thought I was back in the swamp. "How do they keep them lit? I don't see any wood or pitch."

Rick pointed at the sconce. "There is a vast store of natural gas under the mountain. For the lighting, the tubes bringing it in are very thin to avoid any kind of incident. Gas illuminates the public area, provides flame for water and cooking, and keeps the place heated."

I had expected all manner of magical details and trappings in the Arcane University, but for some reason I was unprepared for this clever use of natural resources. It dawned on me that this place was a huge daily undertaking for hundreds of people, many of whom were not using magic at all. Feeling a bit humbled, I followed my friends down the hallway.

We arrived at the checkpoint to the South Wing. There were both mundane and magic-using guards sitting in a stone shack next to a thick iron gate that blocked forward progress. One of the purple robed humans greeted us through a small window in the shack. "Hello folks, welcome back. Just a moment I see that we have a new applicant." He seemed to stare off into space for a moment. "Ah, and you would be Sorch Stonebender! Welcome, and best of luck to you. Might I say that your visit is a historical one. You are the first of your race to apply to the University. There are those who have shifted shape or otherwise polymorphed into an orc, but you are our first true orc. Once you're settled in, Headmaster Hemitath will be ready to receive you. Just let us know and we'll announce you in advance."

I had a score of questions, but after the mage's grand greeting, it didn't seem like the right time. "Thank you sir, I'll do my best to meet the high standards of the University." I kept things simple and

friendly, hoping that there was no ritual that I was missing.

My reply brought a smile to the mage's lips. "Good day folks." was the only reply he made. Then the iron gate slid into a recessed area in the adjoining wall, and we were allowed to pass.

I poked Rick. "How did he know all of that?"

The tall human explained, "The anklets that we wear have auras that contain enough information about you to make an identification and security determinations. Any locations that can read those auras could tell, for example, which areas you're cleared to enter. Security checkpoints, the campus bank, the student union, even the teleportation system makes use of that information."

I nodded my thanks for the explanation as we moved deeper into the South Wing. The decor was simple, almost humble. Although the walls were granite, there were no ostentatious trappings or decorations in the halls. Simple wooden signs helped to direct people to the dining room or the stairways leading to the bedrooms. A large slate hung outside of the kitchen, and the meals available for the day were written in chalk. I had expected everything to run on magic here, but the reality is that they used magic with a measure of respect and restraint. At least in the more public areas.

We walked up one of the stone staircases. On the first landing, I was given a little shove by Toby that made me stagger forward a couple of steps. "This is your stop."

I turned back and blinked at my companions. "We aren't staying in the same place?"

Rick waved me off, pretending to be dismissive. "You are an applying student! We are alumni and honored guests. Go meet your roommate and leave the adults to their business."

I looked to Ames. "But I thought..."

The were-cat padded over to give my cheek a nuzzle. "If you do well, you can come visit me later. If not, don't bother!"

Well, that was motivation.

Will waved at me before turning to proceed upstairs. "You're in room 214. Best of luck." The rest of the group echoed the sentiment, then headed up to the next landing.

I walked up the hallway. Each wooden door looked the same as the last, save for the numbering. The odd numbers were on the left, even on the right, and they incremented as I walked up the hall. I approached a T-junction and read the sign on the wall. Having passed the first ten rooms, I learned that there were fifty more on the left, and fifty on the right. Luckily, my room was just a couple more doors down on the right.

I paused outside of 214 and took a deep breath. Will said I'd be sharing the room. I expected my roommate to be someone young, and smart, and probably not expecting an orc to walk through the door. I mentally prepared myself for a range of different receptions, and then opened the door to enter my quarters.

I wasn't prepared for the big bearhug that I got.

"Leeson!" I exclaimed, surprised but not displeased. I returned the warm embrace.

"Sorch, you survived your trip! Too bad, I wanted to see if I would be in your will."

I made a mental note: Write a will. Leave Leeson out of it.

I closed the door behind us with my foot, then shifted my grip to the shoulders of the raven haired young man. I gave him a little shake. "So I guess this means you did well on the Youth Magic Exams."

The pale human was grinning from ear to ear as he wobbled from my shaking. "Yup! Top of my class. So I guess we're here for the same reason. Well, almost."

I let the lad go so that I could shrug out of my backpack and start to put my stuff away. "Almost?"

He shrugged. "I can't imagine you'd come in as a first year. I don't know if you'd go right into the senior programs, but I'm guessing that you'll be skipping ahead of me."

The truth was, I never even entertained the possibility that I would be coming in as anything other than a novice. But I suppose most novices don't hurl bolts of acid into the torsos of monsters. "It's possible, but I don't know anything about the place. So I won't presume. If I get in at all, I'll be ecstatic."

Leeson told me everything he knew. He arrived last night and took a quick tour of the facilities. He had an interview with the Headmaster in a few hours, and then he would learn the details of his Practical Exam. "I don't know how complex it is, but it's supposed to take the rest of the week. So it's lengthy if nothing else."

I stretched and sighed in relief. It felt like I weighed half as much with all of my gear stowed. "I'm supposed to see her as soon as I'm done here."

The young man stared at me for a moment. "Go. Go! Gosh, Sorch, you don't keep someone like that waiting."

I chuckled. "They said she was doing other things, but they would call ahead as I trekked over. If anyone will be waiting, it will be me. But yes, I'll head over now."

I walked over and gave Leeson a hug. "Good to see you, I hope it all goes well, for both of us."

He hugged back, and then took a seat on his bed. "I'll see you soon, we'll get lunch together."

As I opened the door to leave, I mentioned, "Oh, I've been taking notes on my travels and the expedition if that interests you. The book is on the bed."

Leeson was grabbing the notebook even before I could finish closing the door behind me.

I headed back towards the entryway of the South Wing and let the guards know that I was walking up to the Headmaster's office. They directed me to the North Wing, and assured me that Hemitath would be informed, as well as the checkpoints along the way. True to their word, the guards at the entry to the North Wing as well as the guards protecting the inner offices let me through with a friendly wave.

Headmaster Hemitath's office wasn't what I expected at all. The outer office was little more than a small room with a couple of chairs to sit in, and a desk for the Headmaster's Assistant. The assistant in question was an elderly elven woman with a nonplussed look and some paperwork on her desk. "The Headmaster will see you shortly." she droned, and then promptly ignored me in favor of signing every page in a large stack of documents.

To the credit of such efficient bureaucracy, it was only a few minutes before the inner door opened. "Send him in please." came the soft request from within. Without standing, indeed without even looking at me, the assistant droned, "You can go in now."

Wondering about the minimum charisma requirements for working at the Arcane University, I rose and strode into the Headmaster's office.

What I saw, or to be more precise **who** I saw, stopped me in my tracks.

"You!"

The older elven woman chuckled. "Yes, 'tis I, Levitation woman. You didn't think I would believe a report about a genuine orcish magi without seeing him first hand, did you? Please close the door behind you and have a seat, mister Stonebender."

I carefully shut the door and then I sat in the lovely padded oak chair that was on this side of the Headmaster's desk. I had to be sure: Petite in build. Pale of skin. Unmistakable gold eyes. This was indeed the 'student' that I helped with her Levitation spell many weeks ago.

The Headmaster picked up a set of loosely bound pieces of parchment. "There are cookies in that jar if you would like one. I just need a minute to review your file." Hemitath flipped through the notes, scanning them quickly.

I took a few moments to glance around the room while my host was occupied. Her desk had a jar of bite sized butter cookies and frankly not much else upon it. I helped myself to one of them. The entire back wall was a bookshelf, unsurprisingly. To the right was a surface covered in black silk, looking almost like a seance table. But instead of candles and a brazier, a golden stand was set in the center. That stand held a crystal ball. To the left was a large habitat in thick glass. Peering back at me was an emerald tree boa. It was a lovely specimen, looking very healthy and about as long as I was tall. The snake took the time to poke its head above the glass and... did it just nod at me?!

My surprised translated into a little jump. Hemitath looked up and followed my gaze, and then laughed. The sound was like fairies of pure mirth playing inside of a crystal singing bowl. "Please don't choke on your cookie. That's just Dutch saying hello. Silly girl. You can come out and play with Sorch next time."

If I had been a little disappointed by the lack of visible magic, that moment resurrected the butterflies in my stomach.

The Headmaster retained her smile when that golden gaze refocused on me. "I've been on Panos for three hundred and seventy-one years, and I can honestly tell you that I've never read anything like your profile, mister Stonebender. So congratulations on that."

I finished chewing my butter cookie and then swallowed quickly. I murmured, "Thank you Headmaster."

The old elf continued, "You've had to overcome so much to be here. That absolutely factors into the equation. The desire to learn must be present, and it would be clear to even the least empathic person on my staff that you desire to learn. Other factors are magical talent, which will be tested this week, and magical history."

I nodded. "I'm happy to tell you anything you need to know."

The Headmaster smirked. It looked quite natural on her. "Oh, then you'll be happy to know that Ames has already told me everything I need to know."

My eyes widened. "Ames? W-when? What did..."

Hemitath held up one hand to calm me. "Relax young orc. I think you'll find that when Ames is in

love with you, bragging about your accomplishments is part of that deal, like it or not.”

I blushed several shades greener. In love? I had hoped, but never asked. I tried to think of something to say, but the Headmaster continued before I could comment.

“You’re clearly more accomplished than our first and second year students, particularly in the ways of battle magic. They’re hurling Magic Missiles while you’re conjuring Flame Blades and Acid Bolts... and dispatching evil in the process. But the most telling spell is the one that you used to create the ring that our were-cat friend was showing off.”

I nodded slowly. “It felt like the right next step. My name never really made sense to me until I saw that spell. I knew right away that I needed to master it.”

The elf agreed, “It was an excellent next step, and one that even a third year wouldn’t be able to incant. So in that way, your magical history would put you in with our advanced students in the West Wing. But I can’t ignore the obvious gaps in traditional magic. Your style needs to be translated into a common vocabulary, as it were. And all of the basics need to be covered.”

My heart started to sink. This wasn’t sounding good.

Hemitath held up a finger. “However. If you agree to accept a couple of extra classes in lieu of an elective specialization, I don’t see why you couldn’t pick up Magic Theory and Working Magic in parallel to more advanced studies. It means that you would remain a generalist for an extra year. Is that acceptable?”

The word “Yes.” was out of my mouth in an instant.

The Headmaster smiled and set down my notes. “Then pending your assessment this week, that is the level that we’ll aim for. If your practical exams go well, I’ll tailor a set of courses suitable to you. The starting of the academic year is in a few months. You just need to stay alive until then and not get incinerated on one of your foolish adventures.”

I smiled at the old elven woman. “I will attempt to follow that instruction most ardently, Headmaster.”

“Now. Tell me about your dreams. Not the one about your lover either.”

I didn’t expect that question, but I was more than happy to share the contents of that particular nightmare with someone like Hemitath. If anyone might decipher that foreboding portent, it was her.

I explained that in my dream, the Voodoo Engine syphoned everything from every orc, getting bigger and bigger until all civilizations were crushed. I told her that in the end, the Voodoo Engine crushed the entire world.

The elven archmage nodded, as in if expecting to hear something like that. “I’m worried about a rising force of destruction in Panos. Yours is not the only portent that I’ve heard about, but it is the most... odd. Oddly specific at least. It could be because the Arcane Syphon represented a particular form of tyranny in your life. Or maybe it’s more than that. I’ll run it past my people and see what our research turns up.”

After a relieved sigh, I nodded. “Thank you. It would be a load off of my mind.”

Hemitath stood up and offered her small, pale hand. “We’re done here. You’ll be reviewing a list of spells that we believe may be appropriate for you. Said list includes the names of the professors that

teach those spells. You're being asked to select two spells known by a single teacher, who will become your mentor for the week. My assistant will give you the list on the way out. Study it and give us your answer in the morning. Welcome to the Arcane University."

I stood and shook the elf's hand gently (at least for an orc). "I thank you for your hospitality."

As I was leaving, Hemitath noted. "Mister Stonebender. The walls are thick here, but I would appreciate that any... encounters with Ames be restricted to the feline's room. Young lord Leeson's parents would never let me hear the end of it if he observed any of that sort of thing."

I murmured an affirmative and slipped out of the Headmaster's office before she could see me blushing yet again.

The Headmaster's Assistant was blindly holding a piece of parchment in front of her, as she continued to read a form on her desk. When I didn't take it right away, she waggled it in the air, making her irritation clear. I quickly snatched the parchment and then headed back to my assigned quarters.

When I entered room 214, I saw Leeson voraciously reading my journal. "Is Ames alright?" he asked, voice quavering a little bit. He hadn't gotten to the recovery part yet.

"Ames is fine." I assured the young man, in soothing tones. I gently took the tome from my former student's hands. "Upstairs, likely after enjoying a hot bath and some catnip. The whole crew is up there actually, save for me. We're expecting an Arcane University bounty for some necromantic items that we found on our little adventure."

"Oh!" The young human put two and two together. "I knew Will was here, he stopped by. When I told him you were away, he left this." Leeson reached over to the writing desk to get a scrap of parchment, which he handed to me.

I unfolded and read the note aloud, for the human's benefit.

"Dear Sorch, the ring ended up being a Soul Trapper, one of the more nefarious devices available to a necromancer. The bounty for all of the items came to 3,000 gold pieces. Not counting what has already been split, and adding the value of the earth mage's spellbook (after our commission), our take will be just over 4,000 gold. Your split as a junior partner is 450 gold coins. We'll settle up when we reach civilization again, or you can make use of the University bank if we can get you registered as a chartered adventurer with them. I don't see that as an issue. - Will"

Leeson smiled at me when I finished reading. "450 gold. Is that good for your typical adventure?"

I tossed the note back on the table. "Not sure to be honest, but it's good for me. It also means I owe Shaman another 33 gold in next month's shipment, since what I already sent doesn't quite cover the split that I had in mind. But it's a good problem to have."

We celebrated over lunch. As part of the celebration, the young human noble insisted that we had to consume something that was made from wheat and cocoa and milk. It sounded odd, but I gave it a try.

That was when I discovered that I loved fudge cake.

When Leeson headed off for his own interview, I took my afternoon nap. I expected that his return would wake me, but the lad snuck in quietly and allowed me to rest for two full hours. After waking, I started to prepare my meditation space.

“Sorch, what kinds of questions did the Headmaster ask you?”

I considered what I could tell the young nobleman. “Uhhh, you know, stuff and things. A lot of it ended up being personal. And you?”

He opened his mouth, and then closed it again without saying a word. Finally he just agreed with me, “I guess ‘stuff and things’ covers it pretty well.”

I snorted, amused. “Did you get the assignment to learn two spells this week?”

Leeson nodded. “I’m happy to compare lists after you’re done with your enhancement.” He had seen me do this several times when he was my student, and politely forewent further conversation until I had refreshed my intellect.

As it turned out, the spells I was being offered were a magnitude more difficult than the ones offered to Leeson. In the end he settled on Blink and Protection from Evil. They were taught by Professor Dunn, an expert in protection and escape from the elven city of Arbitros.

I had decided on Max’s Message and Lightning Bolt, from none other than Max himself. My young human friend tried to talk me out of it.

“Sorch, Master Max is somewhat of a legend in the magical community. If you’ll pardon my language, he’s a legendary dick.”

I pursed my lips, considering. “I don’t see how his prowess in the bedroom has anything to do with-”

Leeson cut me off, blushing all the while, “No, no, no. It’s an expression Sorch. It means he’s temperamental... actually it means he’s downright rude, and intentionally so. He’s going to be hard to work with.”

I nodded slowly. “But he created the spell that I wish to learn. You of all people know how important that is.”

The young noble threw his hands up in the air. “But you ended up being nice! Professional. Sure I didn’t know that at the time, but we know Master Max’s reputation already. You only have six days Sorch, are you sure it’s worth the conflict?”

I seriously considered Leeson’s words. “I’m not sure. I could actually learn from one of the Headmaster’s former students, but the list of spells... they just don’t fit my personality. Counterspell? Hypnotic spells? Perhaps some day, but offense and communication are more important to me right now. Is that reasonable?”

Leeson sighed. “Yes, I suppose. I’ll do a little research on Master Max in my spare time. It looks like I’m going to have an easier week than you will. If I discover anything that will help, I’ll let you know.”

The next morning, each of the seventeen candidates was invited to declare their spell selection. We gathered in the East Wing’s main lecture hall. The six professors that had been listed were all waiting to see how many students they would be tutoring this week. I was the last to announce my choice.

It was a fairly even distribution in the end, with each of the five Professors having between two and four students, and the single Master having none. That’s how I knew who Master Max was, as he was still standing alone in the front of the room. To be more accurate, he was sitting while everyone else was standing. Given his reputation, I probably could have guessed who he was from his attire: A dirty cotton shirt and farmer’s jeans, complete with suspenders. He seemed to be disinterested in the proceedings. The eighty year old, balding human looked like he was dozing off, if I’m being

honest.

Finally it was my turn. I stood up and said, "I choose Master Max to teach me Max's Message and Lightning Bolt."

The old human nearly fell out of his chair. "What?!" he cried in disbelief. There was a general murmur in the crowd, and I received a lot of sympathetic looks.

The Headmaster tried to bring proceedings to a close quickly. "That concludes the mentor selection process."

"Like the hells it does! I never agreed to this brand of idiocy. Is this a joke, Hemitath?"

The elf tried to calmly reason with the wizened human. "Master Max, I assure you—"

The old Master bellowed, drowning Hemitath's voice out, "Is this a funny joke? Because if so, it's in bad taste. This is how you want me to spend my valuable time? On that?" His boney finger pointed right at me. I was a little embarrassed to have been the catalyst for this public scene. But the embarrassment was quickly giving way to anger.

Hemitath sounded angry herself, at this point. "Max, we can discuss this privately after we're done here."

But the old mage was on a full boil, and he wasn't stopping yet. He addressed me directly now. "Why don't you pick one of these also-ran's, and let me get some real work done, boy? I mean, come on! I'm not sure if you're a sideshow attraction or just a clown. Which circus did you escape from, anyway?"

"I think it's next to the retirement community that you're supposed to be in, you shrivelled old gasbag."

I didn't realize who had said that until the sound of my own voice echoed back from the far corners of the lecture hall. There was a collective gasp, a couple of murmured prayers, and one of the gathered professors started applauding.

The Headmaster laid down the law. "That is **enough**, both of you! The rest of the candidates and professors are dismissed. Sorch, I'll see you privately. And then we'll have a discussion, Master Max."

I waited while the majority of people filtered out. Leeson was staring at me as he walked past, as in if he thought I had gone insane. A burly brown furred were-wolf, the professor that had been applauding I believe, made a detour on his way out to silently give me a pat on the shoulder.

Hemitath beckoned me over with the quirk of a finger. I approached, head hanging a little bit. But rather than the expected dressing-down, the Headmaster simply murmured to me, "Are you certain that you want Master Max? That was Professor Gideon, he teaches out of the Destruction subset of magic. It is fairly clear that he would be willing to teach you Lightning Bolt and another combat spell of your choosing."

I seriously considered the alternative scenario on offer. But in the end I shook my head. "I think that Max's Message is a better fit for my repertoire, Headmaster."

The elven woman patted my arm, gently. "So be it. Report to Master Max's classroom in the West Wing tomorrow at ten in the morning. I'll see to it that he's waiting for you. Dismissed."

I nodded my thanks to the venerable elf, then departed the room without casting another glance at

my chosen mentor.

Not only was Leeson waiting for me when I returned to room 214, but my entire adventuring group had joined us as well.

Questions ranged from 'Are you okay?' (thank you Leeson) to 'Are you insane?' (almost everyone else) to 'Do you want me to kill him for you?' (Ames, of course).

I assured everyone that everything was fine, and despite my somewhat unwise outburst, I was going to make the most of the opportunity.

Rick commented, dryly, "So you've chosen the most difficult mentor available, insulted and alienated him, and you still expect to get the job done." It was a statement rather than a question.

I wore a brave smile, but only had silence to answer the obviously troubling implications.

The tall human sighed. "Let's go folks, nothing to see here."

My friends filtered out, offering words of generic encouragement as they went. Soon I was alone with Leeson again.

The young man was just standing there, shaking his head slowly.

I rolled my eyes. "Stop that. I'm neither dead nor dying. Anything short of that and we're ahead of the game."

The young human scowled. "Lizard crap! This is your future we're talking about Sorch, for the gods' sakes."

I sighed a little bit. "First of all, 'lizard crap' is my thing. Second of all, I should be dead several times over by now. I see anything that happens from this point onwards as a bonus."

The noble son folded his arms over his chest. "That's a cavalier attitude to have about something that affects the rest of your life."

I peered at him. "You know, you impersonate a middle aged mother of three remarkably well for a kid. Maybe acting is your true calling."

"Sorch!"

I held up a palm, stopping any further recriminations from my former student. "I know. I know. I'm going to show up tomorrow morning and make the best of it. I certainly won't lose any sleep over it. If my best isn't good enough, I'll find another way."

I did sleep that night. Just not very well.

After my morning rituals, I reported to Master Max's classroom. Unsurprisingly, he had no other students. Also unsurprisingly, the place was a study in chaos. Books and notes were scattered everywhere, material components were unlabeled and ill-stored. The slate chalkboard was filled with notes from an unrelated endeavour. Even in my limited capacity to understand these things, the writings seemed more like fanciful ramblings than mystical theory.

And standing in the center of it all was Max. He looked even older and more sour than yesterday. His thinning hair was wild, like masses of spider silk after being blown around in a windstorm. The magus wore the same farmer's jeans that he had donned yesterday, but he had picked up a small coffee

stain between then and now. The look he was giving me was best defined as 'smouldering'.

"So, you had the guts to show up. You can't hide behind a language barrier, given your shameful but at least competently phrased attack on me yesterday. So now we will weigh your ineptitude on its own merits... or more likely, lack of merits."

I walked deeper into the room. I moved a stack of parchment from one student desk to another, clearing a workspace for myself. After sitting, I commented, "Since we're dispensing with the niceties, don't expect any particular use of honorifics, Max." His gaze narrowed even more as he watched my every move. "And since we're being so honest, what did the Headmaster threaten you with? Firing? Leave of absence?"

The old man stalked to the front of the room, rapidly transcribing his blackboard notes onto parchment. "Worse... vacation. I have four years accrued. She was gonna make me take all of them, all at once."

I had to laugh at that. Hemitath had a lot of style.

The wizened Master finished his transcription, then threw an eraser at me. "Clear the board. Since our fates are intertwined, we're going to attempt the impossible: Teaching a tribal primitive the intricate language of the spellcasting elite. You'll fail to some degree, without a doubt. But if we can show at least some progress, we may all get what we want."

I erased the board, and then without being asked, wiped it down with a fine cloth to get rid of the lingering white dust. "Where do we start?"

The human heaved a huge sigh. "At the start."

I wouldn't admit it to Master Max, but the old man had a brilliant take on magical theory. He was weaving together the elements of a spell in a manner that none of my books had come close to covering. Everything was about balance: Power to speed, material component to desired effect, subconscious intent to manifested reality. All concepts that I understood in isolation, but he brought them together in a new triangular balance that opened doors in my mind. I said almost nothing in those first few hours, scribbling notes as the old man furiously ground through two pieces of chalk.

By the time lunch had arrived, both of us were nursing aching wrists. "Food will be sent up. Then we rest, and I want to see that stupid spell of yours. The unmasking of a pretender starts with the analysis of their flawed craftsmanship."

I grit my teeth to prevent myself from retorting. Instead I simply said, "Have them send up some of the fudge cake."

The fudge cake made the day bearable.

Truth be told, the afternoon session ended up being better than the cake. After a rest, I casted my Augmented Intelligence in front of Master Max. He stared at me for a full minute after I had finished. The older human quickly wiped out one of the chalkboards and scribbled down computations and casting details that nobody should have been able to discern after observing a single casting. He was writing down things about my spell that I hadn't perceived or accounted for. I opened my spellbook and started making notes in the margins.

Max looked at me suspiciously, as in if he thought that I had been switched with a doppelganger during lunch. Then the questions rained in. How did I calculate the minimum material component? Why was my inflection so sharp on the sixteenth syllable? Was there a strain in my diaphragm at the

height of the third somatic gesture?

I answered every question as honestly and fully as I possibly could. Each question gave rise in my mind to new possibilities, subtle improvements or variations. More notes in the margins were the results.

“Show me the spell in your book.”

I finished my last note, sprinkled some fine sand over the ink, and then spun my spellbook 180 degrees. Max spent several minutes going over my work. As he was pouring over the fine details of the incantation, I realized that I had learned more in a few hours with the old man than I had in weeks of private study.

He slowly rotated the book until it was facing me again. “Alright then. Let’s get to work.”

For the rest of the day, my own spell was dissected before my eyes. Although some of the criticism was needlessly harsh, the process was establishing a common vocabulary. My origins were as a hedge wizard at the end of the day, and Max was an amazingly powerful and traditionally trained magus. I quickly learned the verbiage that he used when describing spells and techniques, and I learned them through the lens of perception that only my most belovedly crafted creation could provide.

“...and that’s why you need to consider material quality as well as raw mass. I expect even a primitive such as yourself should be able to produce a graph of acceptable purities and weights. Well. That’s all. Tomorrow the real work starts. Dinner time. Dismissed.”

I rose and left the room without a word.

My mind was spinning. The thought that kept resurfacing was: ‘Why did such a brilliant man have to be such a horse’s ass?’ But the amount of raw knowledge that he had been able to push into my brain was astounding. I knew that I needed to get a full night’s sleep if I was going to keep up with the wily old mage tomorrow morning. I stopped in to give Ames a quick update, and to reassure the feline that I was fine. Then I retreated to my room in order to crawl into bed. Surprisingly, my young roommate was already in bed himself, snoring away.

I finally caught up with Leeson early the next day, having completed my morning rituals and a short bath before the young man managed to roll out of bed. He was doing well, enjoying the challenge set before him. He said he had news about Master Max that might help me.

“Most of my research didn’t turn up anything other than what you could find in his official school biography. However, I think the racial bias stuff might all be an act. Apparently he’s just as harsh with his human students as any others, and just picks a different set of insults to use when he teaches them.” the nobleman’s son said as he pulled his socks on.

I considered this information as I sipped the cup of tea that I had purloined from the kitchens on the way back from my bath. “The question is, why?”

Leeson shook his head as he laced up his boots. “Nobody seems to know. At one point a couple of decades ago, he was dating the Headmaster. But the anger started before they broke up... it might have been the cause of the breakup. He started treating everyone badly, and they all pulled away. Whatever happened to change him doesn’t seem to have any correlation with a publicly observed event.”

I thanked my young companion, and asked him to drop my teacup off when he stopped in for

breakfast. I wanted to get an early start with Master Max.

When I arrived in the classroom however, all indications pointed towards a late start rather than an early one. At least for Max. He had absolutely filled two slate boards with notes on the Lightning Bolt spell. Both technique and theory were covered, under the heading: 'Transcribe, Greenskin.'

I dutifully started to copy the notes into my spellbook, keeping in mind the triangular balance that was the cornerstone of Master Max's method. There were footnotes with references to other books, so some hunting and sorting through the chaotically scattered classroom materials was required.

By the time the old mage walked into his classroom, mug of steaming coffee in hand, I was cleaning up my notes and translations. He was two hours late, but infuriatingly his estimate of how long I would take to transcribe everything was spot-on. He strode over to take up position just behind my seat. The annoying but brilliant man stood over my shoulder, sipping his beverage loudly in my ear, and pointing out a couple of minor mistakes in my notes.

After deriving sufficient pleasure from my irritation, Master Max shuffled to the front of the classroom and erased what was on the board. "We have two days for this primitive spell, best used for murdering helpless goblins I'm sure. Then we have three days to spend on **real** magic. Magic that allows two minds to touch each other across any distance, breaking the barriers of sight, sound, and even breaching the planar veil. Magic that I very much doubt you can wield. But we will endeavour to make you understand the basics well enough to make it clear that any failure is the fault of your talent, rather than my genius."

I sighed, "Is today going to be a study in your egomania, Max, or will we be taking a break from admiring your former glory to get some real work done?"

The elderly human's expression was hard to read at the best of times, but I thought I detected a little amusement creeping into his features, if only for an instant.

"You seem to have at least a primitive grasp on that lovely sledgehammer of a spell you call 'Acid Bolt'. Let us build upon your dubious knowledge of that fetid chestnut, so that you might be able to do even more damage to whatever innocents, women, and children you happen to run across."

All prodding aside, that's exactly what Max did. Parallels were drawn between what I already knew about hurling acid and what I was going to learn about hurling electricity. We started with targeting, then moved on to range. Intent and mindset were almost identical, as it happened. The material component changed however, to a brass rod and animal fur. The components were not consumed in the casting, I discovered.

Max left me to get familiar with the material components, my task being to analyse the elemental and mystical aspects to be harnessed, and determine why the materials persisted after the spell was cast. The human cited 'real work to be done' and said he would be back at lunch time.

I discovered that the material components weren't the sacrifice, the static spark was. By rubbing the brass and fur together, energy was produced. The spark was sent into the quasi-elemental planes and a conduit was opened. That very brief window into another world allowed the caster to pull forth a bolt of destructive electricity.

By the time Master Max returned, I was working on somatic gestures. He had a first year apprentice in tow, who was pushing a wobbly-wheeled wooden dinner cart. "Stop. Lunch." was all the old man said. The student was made to clear a space on one of the cluttered classroom desks, lay out a meal of baked chicken with turnips, and then told to beat a hasty retreat. We ate in silence. Then the old

man waddled back over to his own chair, closed his eyes, and took a nap. The one advantage of working with the ornery codger was that my own midday rest periods weren't called into question.

When we both woke, it was time to play follow the leader. Master Max would run through the somatic components at full speed, and then I would copy his movements as he observed. Amongst the ever-present abuse was the odd scattered compliment. I always was good at mimicry, and even Max had to admit to observing some talent in that area.

By the end of the day, my mind was frazzled and my body sore. The old human drew things to a close by saying, "Tomorrow you put it all together. That or you fail miserably. Either way we need three solid days for your next bungled attempt at magic, so that's that." I stared at the back of his head, absently wondering where my beloved Rock was right now.

Everyone got together for dinner that night, leaving our youngest dinner companion a little bit starstruck. To Leeson's right was two graduate alumni and active adventurers... and those were the ones he knew well. Across from him, two exotic creatures, also adventurers, and one of them the size of a small house. I sat to the lad's left. That wasn't for his benefit really, I just wanted to sit next to Ames.

Over some kind of baked pasta dish that was very comforting to me, Will and Rick gave me some helpful tips for executing the Lightning Bolt spell. I took them on board, but was rather distracted by a naked feline footpaw running up and down my leg under the table. I shot a couple of warning glances at Ames, but the feline only smiled toothily at me.

Once he got over his shyness, Leeson had a dozen questions, most of them directed at Toby. The theatrical minotaur was more than happy to tell his tales. I tried to concentrate on the paladin's words, but those curious were-cat toes crept higher on my leg until...

I jumped in my seat, bumping the table hard with a knee. I practically growled, "Excuse us." My meaty green hand found Ames' shoulder. The feline had slipped those mischievous toes back into their boot just in time to be dragged off. The only study that was accomplished that night involved pleasure thresholds and the structural integrity of the University's bed frames.

Somewhat ill-rested but far more relaxed, I showed up for the morning study session. Once again, no Max. There was a thick, somewhat singed log leaning against one of the stone walls. Miraculously, desks had been moved and the room had been tidied up somewhat so that nothing would catch fire; the task probably completed by the hands of overworked students. The slate board simply said 'Dry runs, no material components, don't hurt the log.' I was to execute the verbal and somatic components of the Lightning Bolt spell without using the brass or fur.

About an hour into practice, Max showed up. As he walked by with his mug, I caught the scent of wine rather than coffee. I commented, "Isn't it a little early for that?"

"No." was the flat reply. I sighed, and went back to my drills.

After watching me for almost the entire morning session, the aged mage commented, "Your form is good. It's a tragic waste of course."

The mixed compliment and insult gave me pause. I shook out the tension in my calloused hands and asked, "A waste?"

Max nodded. "Think about it. A high percentage of your power has to be dedicated to overcoming what amounts to a racial defect. A portion of the spells that you memorize will always be to artificially boost your intelligence. The drain exists on the financial, mental, and parapsychical levels. If

I was teaching anyone other than yourself, one hundred percent of the effort would be reflected in the result. With you, it will always be this absurd juggling act. Hells, without that amulet you wear, you're useless. In essence, I'm just giving you the ability to drain your intellect even faster. Which means you need to dedicate more resources to enhancing it, and so on, and so on. It's a downward spiral. And a waste."

I nodded slowly. His logic was flawless. Nothing he said was strictly wrong. I was at a disadvantage, and there was nothing that turned it into an advantage in any way. "So what's next?" I asked.

The master mage shrugged. "Well I supposed you could start a little business somewhere. Perhaps become a night watchman with a magical bent. Something non-taxing that would make use of your limited talents."

I shook my head. "No, I mean..."

I picked up the rod of brass and swatch of fur from my desk. A few moments later, the room was filled with a thunderclap as my Lightning Bolt crashed into the log, setting it ablaze in the process.

"...what's next?"

The elderly magus and I stared at each other for a few long moments. Finally, he answered.

"Put out the damned fire. Then lunch."

We had an extra half day to master Max's Message. My confidence soared. I had gained an understanding of Max's magical 'vocabulary', and I had to admit that I was a much better magic user because of it. I tackled the afternoon session with a renewed vigor.

I learned that Max's Message sacrificed duration for range. In fact, through a brilliant modification of standard psychic contact magic, the range of Max's spell was infinite. If you kept the number of words to two dozen or less, and assuming you had personal knowledge of the target, you could send a message to any intelligent creature, anywhere on Panos. They could then respond, with the exact same restrictions. Anything above two dozen words however, and the spell fizzled. That was the tradeoff.

Max's Message used a braid of copper wire as the material component. As I had blacksmiths cutting up my copper coins all the time, this was yet another task for them. Luckily, my copper supply was quite large at this point.

The next few days were intense, but for me, the result was never in question. Leeson was thriving in this environment, and I had it on good authority from Professor Dunn that the lad was going to pass with flying colors. As for myself, I kept a healthy sleep and study schedule, save for the night prior to my final test. I figured that Ames was such a good luck charm last time, sacrificing a little bit of sleep for a little bit of entertainment and relaxation was the only logical, responsible thing to do.

The were-cat was probably somewhat shocked and flustered when, in the early afternoon of the last day, a colorful and ribald suggestion suddenly popped into their head. To be honest, I wasn't certain if Ames even owned a whip. Luckily the string of curses that the feline responded with was less than twenty-four words.

Max made me cast the spell again with him as the target, to confirm that everything was working properly. I sent him the message: 'The reason I did this was to become a better person. Don't think of it as a waste. I certainly don't.'

The response that I got was a very neutral: 'I received the message.'

Without a word to me, Master Max picked up his quill, dipped it in ink, and jotted down a short note on a torn scrap of parchment. He slipped it into an envelope and sealed it. The Master's signet ring was pressed into the hardening wax. "Take this with you when you go to see the Headmaster. Let's clean up the final details in your spellbook and be done with this foolishness."

Max did have some good points to add to my process. As with the other spells that he had examined in my spellbook, the margins of the pages were quickly being filled with small modifications and interesting details.

As I was finishing my final notes, Max struck up a conversation, which was unusual for him. "It's a shame that you don't have the kind of time and resources required to make a better version of your spell. Something more efficient."

I gave him a look that must have conveyed what I was thinking: Why are you telling me this, old man?

The 'venerable' old codger continued, "My next research project happens to be called Max's Mental Magnification. Of course the scope of it is beyond your feeble grasp of magic... at least presently. But while you were sleeping, I took the liberty of learning the little party trick that you created. It's cute."

I paused in my writing to stare at him. "You stole my spell?!"

Max snorted. "Call it a trade. Because **if** you survive that long, and **if** you can afford the gold-based material component for Max's Mental Magnification... well. Who better to test it on than a simpleton such as yourself?"

I couldn't find words. This sort of unexpected kindness, even if couched in a massive backhanded insult, was the last thing I would have anticipated.

"This is assuming by some miracle that you find yourself attending this fine establishment, instead of being propelled ass-first into the swamp that you came from. I expect the later, but who knows."

With that, Max rose and slowly made his way out of the classroom. He called over his shoulder, "Clean up after you're done, and make sure you collect all of your belongings on the way out, including that letter. I'm locking up in half an hour, regardless"

And with that, Max was gone.

I kept my appointment with Hemitath, dutifully delivering the note from Max. After taking both a seat and a cookie at the Headmaster's behest, I watched as the elven archmage opened the envelope. She chuckled at the contents. Seeing my curiosity, Hemitath handed over the very brief note.

It read simply: 'Send more like this.'

The old elven mage noted, "That's the nicest thing Max has said about a student in the past twenty years, believe it or not. Anyway. The results of your assessment will be sent in the next few weeks, courtesy of the spell that you just learned. We need to rate you against those vying for similar positions within the Arcane University. However, feedback so far has been quite positive."

I handed Max's note back to the Headmaster. "Thank you for the opportunity, and for your

kindness.”

Hemitath waved it off as nothing with one pale hand. “Of course. Now, if you’re so inclined, I would like to invite you and your friends to a private dinner”

I nodded, “Of course, Headmaster.”

She explained, “The invitation is somewhat selfish if I’m being honest. I have some business that I would like to discuss. Would you be so kind as to round up your group, pack your things, and say goodbye to your roommate?”

I stood quickly. “Right away.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you in two hours.”

Chapter 14

I gathered my things from room 214, got another big bearhug from Leeson as a parting gift, and then went to join my companions at dinner. On my way through the reception hall, I stopped by the University bank. They confirmed that my account had been approved, and that Rick had already made a deposit in the amount of my remaining share. Access to the money, from any branch throughout all of Panos, was controlled by the same identity anklet that was used on the school grounds.

The Headmaster's private dining area was an elegant little room. Padded redwood chairs surrounded an oval table made of granite. There was a shuttered serving hatch that bridged the kitchen and the dining area, allowing food to be passed through quickly and efficiently. A cheese course was followed by a lovely vegetarian stew. The main dish was venison served with butter fried potatoes, which sounded too rich for my tastes. I was happy to be proven wrong, of course.

The Headmaster seemed content to allow each of us to tell our best adventuring stories during dinner. She was particularly interested in my tale about the Silverfish. It was a story that I didn't often tell, as I felt it might upset my friends to hear about how I had gambled with my life. There was more than one thoughtful and concerned face by the time I was done, but at least it had a happy ending.

Hemitath waited until the vanilla sponge cake had been served before getting down to business.

"I want to thank you all for coming. As I get older and older, I find that my friends seem to get younger and younger. That's a good thing. When I took this position at the Arcane University, I swore that I would not allow things to stagnate. It was this pledge that caused us to increase funding towards exploration, recovery, and bounties of all sorts. But I never expected to personally meet and come to care about dozens of our adventuring brethren. So before I make my pitch to your fine group, let us raise our wine glasses. To the spirit of adventure!"

Did I mention the wine? It was good wine.

After the toast, Hemitath said, "So. I am a representative of both magical education as well as the will of the collective elven lands. The north and the south don't agree on much, but one thing the elves of both Civilia and Arbitros agree on is the concept of stability. Revolution by the people is one thing, but the overthrowing of a government by violence perpetrated from within is quite another matter. In short, we're not fans of treachery. That's the topic of tonight's proposal."

The Headmaster gestured towards the wall, and an illusion flickered to life. A great walled city by the sea appeared. In the center, a palace flying blue banners. "This is Royal Moffit. You know it as the human capital of the southlands. King Wensley Rosen and Queen Ginger Rosen contacted me urgently about two weeks ago. They had caught a spy in their court talking about the downfall of Royal Moffit. They might have dismissed him as a madman if it were not for the man's ridiculously well funded efforts, and his extensive use of magic to remain hidden."

I glanced around, not really knowing the regional politics involved. Everyone else was solemn faced. I followed suit.

"As I believe that Toby had intended to lead his Order's efforts at the upcoming anniversary celebrations in Royal Moffit, this assignment would put you in the right place at the right time. We would like you all to meet with the royal family as well as Duke Harrington, advisor to the Crown and controller of the Harrington fiefdom. Provide any assistance to the investigation that you can. I'm

authorized to offer a guaranteed minimum payment of one thousand gold coins per week.”

There was a murmured discussion amongst our group. I was perfectly willing to help with the research, and it seemed like all of us felt that this was too important and lucrative to pass up.

When the crosstalk died down, the Headmaster noted, “Toby is our preferred public face for this mission. His connection to both the elves and to the Order of the Snow makes him a figure beyond reproach in matters such as this. And we trust him to report back to us while maintaining the appropriate amount of discretion.”

The big bull rumbled, “I’m honored Headmaster, I’ll do my best.”

The aged elven woman continued, “...however, in the background and in secret, it is our unanimous preference that Sorch sets the direction for this investigation.”

All eyes turned towards me in surprise. If I weren’t sitting where I was, my eyes would have also turned towards me in surprise.

I managed an eloquent, “What in the hells?”

Hemitath quickly explained, “Sorch, your dreams directly coincide with increased portents of disaster from some of the most talented Divination experts and religious leaders in the elven lands. They all see something that threatens the world, a seed that is being planted as we speak. Or perhaps one that has already been planted. Your specific version of these portents might apply to your orc tribe, but there’s a broader theme. The one detail that our people have that you do not is the location where it all starts: Royal Moffit.”

The Headmaster gestured towards the wall and the illusion flickered. Soon the image was zoomed in on the castle. “Specifically Moffit Palace. We need you there, with your eyes and ears open, and we need your friends surrounding you to provide guidance, protection, and support. I wish I could be more specific Sorch, but I cannot. I can only say that if you want to prevent the disaster that befalls the Jeywafa tribe within your dream, this might be your best opportunity.”

I drained my wine glass. Then I nodded. “I’ll do it, if my friends are all in agreement.” There was nodding all around the table.

The Headmaster seemed to hesitate, but then asked, “I am glad that you’re willing, however there is a matter I’ve been asked to clarify. Your answer might impact your suitability. I’m sorry to have to ask this Sorch, it is a rather private matter and I don’t want to tamper with how others experience divinity. But the High Priestess wanted me to find out... did you speak directly to Omi-Suteth?”

Somewhat bashfully, as I had only shared the experience with Ames, I admitted, “Yes.”

Will threw a spoon at me. He missed. “What the heck Sorch!” Toby and Rick were also staring at me in disbelief, though they had enough self control to avoid hurling silverware.

Our elven hostess nodded slowly. “It’s okay. Would you explain the vision, or as much as you’re comfortable with?”

I cleared my throat. “Well. We talked about... stuff and things. I apologised on behalf of my people and Kenvunk. Ummm. She called me Stonebreaker, and then Stonemender. Umm. We spoke about dropping the whole curse against my race. But she said first I had to mend what I had broken, and we would see.”

Hemitath looked confused. "So it was more of a personal conversation? With a goddess?"

I did my best to look humble. "I guess?"

The old elven mage shook her head. "I'll relay that back to the High Priestess of Omi-Suteth. Thank you. I don't see how that would hamper your leadership of the mission, so that's fine."

Once again addressing the entire group, Hemitath said, "I have a teleportation crew ready to send you to Royal Moffit tonight. If you have any affairs that need sorting, please write them down and I'll transport runners to Limt and Ice House to have things taken care of in your absence. If the tasks involve an advance on your payment, that's fine. Please enjoy your wine, I'll go make arrangements with the innkeeper at the Drowsy Dragon, he's a personal friend."

When the elf had departed, I got a grilling about keeping my vision from Toby and Will and Rick. But as I explained to them, I might have been going mad for all I knew at the time. I didn't know for sure if it was real.

"And Ames was so casual about it!" I said in my own defense.

The were-cat shrugged, "I was pretty tired. Honestly, I was only half listening. I thought it was a ploy to get in my pants again."

Rick cradled his forehead in his hands. "And **these** are the people who are watching my back. Spectacular."

In the end, my explanation seemed to mollify my friends. Even Will, who had been hurt that I wouldn't share such a thing with him after everything else we had talked about, granted me his forgiveness. They seemed to understand my hesitation, but urged me to share such revelations in the future.

The servants cleared away our plates. They passed around parchment, ink, and quills so that we could write down any matters that we needed to have taken care of in our absence. I jotted down details on my landlord so that I would be paid up through the next couple of weeks. I also stipulated that 25% of my fee was to be sent to Shaman via my preferred courier. The rest could be deposited into my account.

With that done, we gathered up our gear and headed down to the teleporter. At this time of night, there were very few people in the reception hall area. The Headmaster was waiting for us.

Hemitath handed Toby a slip of parchment. "Give this to Ashley for me, it's confirmation that your inn stay is covered for the next two weeks. Good luck." To my surprise, Hemitath stood up on tiptoes and Toby crouched until the elf could kiss the minotaur on the cheek. Then we were ushered onto the metal transport circle. A few moments later, and we were elsewhere.

It was as in if the gazebo from Ice House had been transplanted in a far warmer climate. The night was too dark to see a lot of details, but this was almost certainly the rear yard of the Temple of Omi-Suteth in Royal Moffit. A lone attendant quickly lead us to the back gate, warning us that a storm was brewing.

Once outside, Rick asked, "Do we know where this inn is?"

Toby said, "Yes, follow me. Quickly."

Our version of quick wasn't quick enough. The sky opened up. Raindrops the size of blueberries pelted us as we ran for the Drowsy Dragon. Five hardened adventurers were soon sprinting down

the cobblestone street, because instinct told us that getting wet was unacceptable. Ames started laughing breathlessly. It was infectious. Soon we were all losing our stride and our breath because none of us could keep up the brisk pace while howling with mirth at the absurdity of it all.

We half jogged, half staggered into the main room of the Drowsy Dragon. As things were quiet, we did our best to mute our chortling so as not to disturb other customers. The front room was simple, but orderly. Seven ornately carved stools sat in front of the maplewood bar. The oval tables and large high-backed chairs that were placed throughout the taproom were made of a less expensive cedar, but they were still plenty sturdy.

A tall, slender elf walked up to us. He was dressed all in brown, save for a dusty white apron. He murmured, "Our friends from the Arcane University I assume?"

Toby unslung his pack and dug deeply, until he produced the message from the Headmaster. He shook the folded parchment open with his off hand. It was mostly dry. The minotaur then held out a dripping, golden brown furred hand for shaking. "Ashley I presume. I'm Toby, and these are my compatriots. Oh, here. I hope it stayed dry enough."

Ashley shook the paladin's hand, then folded and pocketed the message without reading it. "I'm sure everything is in order. Only the small rooms are available, but we have three of them. And they're dry, at least."

We thanked the slim elf, took the keys that were offered, and headed upstairs. The top floor of the inn was simple, but charming. A light pine varnish coated the walls and floor, allowing the staff to keep things meticulously clean. Toby got a room to himself, Ames and I shared, and Will and Rick took the last room. The feline and I got dry as soon as possible. Within minutes we were snuggled together under the blankets of our generously sized bed. The two of us fell asleep soon after.

The morning arrived far too soon, but preparations needed to be made. As the mages, myself included, went through their memorizations, our two less arcane oriented members were hard at work. Toby arranged for a messenger to formally announce our imminent arrival to the royal court. Ames stealthily spied on the palace itself: Comings and goings, guard strength and equipment, best observation points, and the like.

As I was casting my final morning intelligence enhancement, the big paladin returned. He waited until the incantation was done, and then spoke. "Alright, that should satisfy protocol. Let's aim to arrive in about one hour. We can pick up Ames on the way. We had breakfast already, you go ahead and grab something to eat. I'll let the human lads know." He ducked out to tell Rick and Will what was going on.

Breakfast at the Drowsy Dragon was simple fare: Sausages, toasted bread, and apple juice. Still, it was a feast compared to what I was eating just a few months ago. I finished my meal, then went to the water pump and washed my hands and face. I had to look good for my first royal appearance.

Royal Moffit was a huge city, easily five times the size of Limt. The architecture was a little more boring however. More uniform. Limt was more quaint and quirky. And this place certainly didn't hold a candle to the crystalline and cavelike features in Ice House. Instead, almost everything was made of red brick or gray stone blocks. Nearly every building was two stories tall. The only structure that was dramatically different was the one we were heading towards.

Moffit Palace was monumental. Not counting the courtyard, which had the footprint of several city blocks, the palace itself was best described as 'towering'. The four corner towers, in fact, were each eleven floors high. They were functional rather than ornamental, meaning that each circular floor

had a rather wide radius so that it could host a large kitchen, a series of bedrooms, an armory... just about any kind of room that one might imagine. The central palace had a broad footprint, and although it wasn't as tall as the surrounding towers, it did have seven floors of functional space plus a basement and a dungeon.

As we turned onto Royal Avenue, Ames slid out of an alley and smoothly fell into step with the rest of the group. The feline took up the rear guard position as we approached the front gatehouse. Toby walked up to the sergeant of the watch and shook his hand warmly. Whether the minotaur knew the large ebony skinned human, or whether it was a display of professional courtesy, I didn't know. Sergeant Archie Lee then introduced himself to each of us. He made sure to let us know that if there were any day to day security questions, he would be happy to answer them. After pleasantries had been exchanged, we were escorted through the courtyard, down several stately halls, and into the throne room.

Although there were hints of opulence here and there, the royal family had chosen not to flaunt their undeniable wealth. Paintings of past kings and queens rested upon the walls, held snugly in gold gilt frames. Wrought iron crystal chandeliers illuminated the main chamber, aided by the occasional torch held in silver wall sconces. A red pile-knotted carpet stretched from the entry doors all the way to the steps of the stately metallic thrones.

Today was a 'closed session' of the royal court, meaning only pre-approved individuals could be in attendance. Normally there would be a screening room to see if petitioner concerns were worthy of royal attention, an open gallery where select people could watch but not participate, a closed gallery where worthy petitioners waited to be heard, and a royal gallery where those of noble blood could sit, watch, and participate if they so choose.

However in a closed session, there was only a royal gallery with perhaps a dozen nobles in attendance, and a short queue of officials and ambassadors waiting for their time in front of the royal family. Upon seeing us enter, a white-wigged man sitting upon the large central throne of steel held up one hand. The merchant who had been speaking shut up immediately.

"Seal the room behind our honored guests please? There will be a pause in entry until after their issues have been addressed." said the king.

King Wensley Rosen was not as old as his powdered wig might indicate. In his mid thirties, the man's voice was robust, powerful. He seemed confident, hale, and in his prime. Queen Ginger Rosen, sitting on a smaller throne at her husband's left side, glanced up when that order was issued. A brilliant smile was aimed in our direction, brief but sincere. The powdered wig on her head did nothing to hide her own youth, which was also betrayed by the young son and daughter playing at her feet.

The merchant continued his petition as the doors behind us were chained. We were offered refreshments. In days past it might have been whole fruit from the gardens, but not even royalty was spared from the changes in climate. Instead, chilled pear juice and honey roasted cashew nuts were the snacks of choice. We accepted of course; it's not a good idea to reject royal hospitality even so soon after breakfast.

In about half an hour, the last petitioner ahead of us was finishing up. She was asking for additional patrols on the northern roads to reduce incidents of highway robbery. The matter was approved for further study and handed off to the finance minister to work out a budget proposal.

Our group stepped forward when the petitioning area was vacated. The other four knelt on one knee

before the royal family. I caught on quickly and was only a split second behind the rest of the group. Only the Queen seemed to notice, flickering her amber eyes towards me. A small, secret smile that conveyed both amusement and reassurance was sent my way. I immediately felt more relaxed.

The King stood and proclaimed, "Rise, please, friends. Ladies and gentlemen of the Court, if it pleases you as much as it pleases us, heartily greet the representatives of the Arcane University." As we stood, there was a healthy amount of applause given such a small audience.

King Wensley waited for the clapping to die down, and then he said, "Sadly the matters about to be discussed are not for the whole Court. I would ask that the Security Council members remain. Would everyone else proceed to the foyer. Today I believe that we have Sara Turu, court cellist, waiting to entertain you during this pause in normal proceedings."

As the nobility and extra staff filed out, the royal children, probably aged about four years for the girl and five for the boy, squealed and ran over to Ames. They practically climbed all over the were-cat. The bewildered rogue was gently tugged over to sit on the step just below the Queen's throne. All this amidst comments and questions like: "Beautiful." "So soft!" "Do you like horses?" "Pretty tail!"

Queen Ginger murmured, amused, "Amanda, Bo. This is our esteemed guest, Ames. Ames, these are the rather outgoing royal children. I hope you'll pardon them, we don't see many were-cats this far south. May I invite you to tea so that you can be properly acquainted with them, afterwards?"

Amidst face and ears being gently stroked, Ames rumbled, "Of course your highness."

"Thank you. Children, our guest is joining us for tea in a while, will you run and tell the steward?"

The lad and lass cheered, and after sneaking in a couple more pets on the 'big kitty', they raced out of the throne room. The doors were closed behind the departing children. Ames quickly hopped up and rejoined the rest of us.

The King smiled at us. "Well. Always an adventure, isn't it?" We all had a chuckle. Then the monarch gestured at each of the two remaining nobles standing in the royal gallery as they were announced. "Allow me to introduce General Stanish Coleton, head of army intelligence."

Stanish was a silver haired gent, but his fine white silk shirt did very little to hide corded muscles that were still formidable after half a century. He wore leathers similar to what Ames wore for adventuring, preferring high mobility over the raw protection of metal armors. On his belt hung a longsword and a shortsword. Even in the bright light of the throne room, the rubies inlaid upon their hilts glowed with a magical aura. I could already see the man dual wielding those two fine weapons in my mind. In that mental scenario, I was on his side, of course.

"And allow me to introduce Duke Marley Harrington, personal advisor to the royal family."

Duke Harrington wore a neutral expression throughout his introduction. Although he looked to be in his mid forties, certain aspects of the Duke's countenance seemed almost youthful. His curly brown hair looked like it was in need of a trim. His blue eyes were sharp and attentive. But clearly the man had been in some kind of accident, or had been injured one or more times. His left arm was missing at shoulder. Patches of his skin looked like they suffered from burns at some point. When I walked in, I had also noticed a scar that ran down the back of his neck. He was dressed entirely in gold and crimson, clothes doubtlessly custom tailored for his disability.

"As I noted to your Headmaster, the Duke will be your liaison in this matter. He is up to date with every detail of the case. Marley, would you present the facts of the incident?"

All eyes turned towards the Duke, situated to our right.

“Thank you Your Highness.” said Duke Harrington, each word careful, almost over-pronounced. “Welcome representatives of the lauded Arcane University. Exactly twelve nights ago, we uncovered a spy in our midst. He was attempting to recruit one of our dungeon laborers into a plot that, apparently, involved the partial or complete destruction of this palace.” He paused for effect, then resumed. “If this had been any normal man, it would have ended there. Madness and delusions of grandeur have claimed more than one soul after all. However. This man was using illusions to remain hidden, and had a rather high priced cover. He was posing as visiting nobility... lifestyle included. Given the mystical nature of this, we contacted your people. And here we are.”

Rick started the questioning, “You said illusions. They were detected at some point?”

The Duke shrugged. “He attempted to use them in the course of being discovered and trying to escape. Such as Invisibility. And such as an illusionary wall that one could simply walk through. He was unsuccessful in the end.”

I asked, “Why recruit a dungeon worker?”

Duke Harrington turned his gaze to me, sharply. He paused a moment, then admitted, “We don’t know. Our theory is that he was planning to free one of our more dangerous prisoners. He would have several to choose from that share his wish, assuming that he ultimately desired the downfall of the royal family.”

Ames gave a little head tilt. “When can we see him?”

“You cannot. He died during interrogation two days ago. I assure you, he was quite healthy when the session started, and nothing was done to him beyond mental tactics and mild irritation. Suddenly, mid question, he was gone. The court surgeon is trying to discover why, but having no luck.”

We looked at each other. Then Rick stated, “Not much to go on.”

The Duke shrugged. “Indeed.”

Stanish piped in, his somewhat breathy voice almost sliding over the silence in the room, “I’ll make all of my people available to you as you require. All of the security reports from the last few months will be at your command. Rest assured, you have our support.”

King Wensley nodded. “Thank you gentlemen.” Then he addressed the group. “We hope that your magical talents can aid this investigation, but we understand if there are simply too few clues. Paladin McGoldberg, I believe you said you’re staying at the Drowsy Dragon? Guest quarters will also be made available to you here, in the palace. The southwest tower, level four will house your entire group in comfort, should you require. It will not be assigned to anyone else for the duration of your investigation. Use the area as you see fit.”

Toby bowed to the King. “Thank you your highness. It will be most useful as a staging and rest area.”

The Queen called over, “Dear Ames, would you please escort me to tea?”

The feline handed their backpack to Toby, and then padded over to Queen Ginger. The human looped her arm through Ames’, as in if being escorted to a formal dance. My favorite were-cat shot a brief look over their shoulder, as in if begging me for help. I just smiled, broadly. The two walked out of the room, using the same exit as the children had used minutes before. Two well armed guards followed.

King Wensley smiled at the four of us remaining. "We'll leave you to it then. Thank you, one and all." He called out, "We shall resume in ten minutes, please inform the court."

The side doors were opened, the rear doors unchained, and cello music flooded in from the foyer. The four of us bowed, and took our leave.

The southwest tower was actually quite a walk from the center of the palace. Eight minutes of hallways and stairs later, and we were in the privacy of our own chambers. It was an open barracks complete with kitchen and pantry, taking up the entirety of the tower floor. The area was functional, but not fancy. The pantry had been stocked with bread, hard cheese, and a few jars of preserved peaches in syrup. There were twelve single beds and as many footlockers. Although not strictly palatial, one could do much worse.

We split up and blanketed every room with Detect Magic. There were no hits other than the items in our possession that we knew to be magical. Toby searched for secret and trap doors, but found nothing.

The first thing I did after the sweep was turn to Will. "Okay. Spill."

The small human looked surprised. "What? How did you know?"

I snorted. "Because you kept your mouth shut. Since when does that happen? What did you see?"

The mage huffed, but admitted, "I didn't **see** anything as such, but something doesn't add up. If something they were doing in interrogation, fairly non-violent by the sounds of it, killed this spy... why did it take ten days? So he keels over two days ago... likely just after our Headmaster proposed her plan. Why, natural causes? No way."

Toby considered the options, pacing up and down the long aisle between the rows of beds. "Poisoned? Maybe magically assassinated?"

Rick noted, grimly, "If other Illusionists were involved, there's a powerful spell called The Phantom Killer. It would leave no marks. Only the victim would have seen it. He would have had to willingly believe in it given his situation, but if he wanted to die before he broke..."

That grim thought hung in the air for quite a while.

We unpacked our own things and started to get organized. I was unpacking for Ames in the were-cat's absence, when the door opened.

I called over, "We think we might have some ideas."

"So do we." was the reply.

Ames entered, but was followed by a slim, cloaked figure. Only when she threw off her hood did we all realize we were standing in the presence of royalty.

There was a chorus of bowing, kneeling, and recitations of 'Your Majesty'. But the Queen was having none of it.

"No, no, stop. Y'all don't hafta do that now, there isn't time. Call me Ginger, and get me some o' them peaches and a fork."

The jarring country inflection of Her Royal Highness was quite a shock. But I gathered my wits and headed out to the kitchen. Everyone followed, and planted themselves in chairs around the huge

wooden table. I put the requested items in front of our royal visitor.

Ginger said, "I wanna thank Ames here fer being my cover. Th' kids do like you sugar, and I hope ya liked the tea. But I gotta tell y'all, I think Harrington is full o' sheep crap." She grabbed the jar, popped it open, and speared one of the sweet peach chunks with a fork before devouring it.

Toby cleared his throat, "Your Hi... Ginger. You think we're being lied to?"

The royal ragamuffin shrugged. "Can't rightly say lyin'. Maybe just hiding the whole truth. Either way, he isn't the only spy in town. Got me my own people, and had him followed. Most of it was borin', but last week he ended up meeting with th' Bishop of Korothe. Never heard of his family havin' ties there."

Ames didn't get the reference. "Korothe?" I shook my head, not knowing either.

Will fielded that one, "Korothe the Broker is the demon who negotiated The Great Wager amongst the gods, and the architect of the contract banning angels and demons from setting foot on Panos."

Rick asked Ginger, "What would his motive be?"

The Queen gestured around with a fork dripping with syrup. "Everything. Enough o' the royal family dies, his line takes over. Harrington was heir to th' biggest fiefdom in the kingdom when his folks died. Reckon we might be next."

I considered. "We're supposed to report to him."

Ginger shook her head, strawberry blond curls bouncing around. She downed another peach slice, then tapped her fork on the edge of the open jar. "Y'all now report ta me. You tell that snake a whole lotta nothin'. No real progress, still fleshing out leads. I'll square it with my girl Hemi, don't worry."

We had a brief discussion as to our next move, but before we came to a decision, the Queen stood up. She handed Will her fork and then pulled up her hood again.

"I gotta get back. Keep me informed."

"Ginger." I called.

"Yeah?"

"Your formal accent is amazing."

She laughed. "Ya know honey. I was gonna say the same thing to you."

And with that, the most powerful woman in the land left, breath smelling of preserved peaches.

"Alright." I said. "The Temple of Korothe is our next stop. But we need to put on a good show for the royal court. Suggestions?"

Rick said, "The dungeon is an easy way to kill a day's worth of investigation. Look into why the worker was approached. And at the same time examine the interrogation room."

Toby chimed in, "Korothe demands midnight services during the week, so assuming this temple follows the same traditions as others I've seen, we'll be able to say we're going back to the Drowsy Dragon before slipping out to attend."

Ames had been murmuring to Will. The small human nodded to the feline, then said aloud. "And

we'll likely be followed. I'll take care of obfuscating us magically, and Ames can cover our physical traces."

I was satisfied with the details. "Good. Toby will handle explaining our fake plan to them. Since we're actually going to investigate the dungeon, he won't be lying. We will go back to the Dragon first to wait for an hour and make sure we weren't followed, so again, no lying there. The three arcane casters will get some rest, and prepare for the worst."

After our midday spell memorization, we requested access to the dungeon. General Coleton assigned a pair of his men to hold torches, answer questions, and watch our backs as we examined the palace's depths. Local guides were always welcome.

It was an afternoon of slow discovery. The dungeons had no obvious escape route, no secret passages. There were only tiny grates that led to the sewer, and each was bolted down tightly. If the intention was to free one or more prisoners, they would need to travel back up the heavily guarded stairway. The interrogation room was a dead end as well. There was no magical item or mystical presence that would enhance the stress levels of the captured spy to the point of a heart attack. We headed back to our private tower floor to 'discuss the results'.

After a quick sweep with Detect Magic to make sure that no mystical forces were listening, I put our plans into motion. "Let's pack everything up and take it all with us. We don't know what would be tampered with. Toby, you can make the report to the Duke on the way out."

While the minotaur set up our entirely truthful smokescreen, we gathered at the palace's main exit. Once Toby was finished, the five of us headed back to the inn. Dinner was had, then the surveillance started. We had picked up a tail. After an hour of observing the spy, we estimated that he was working alone.

Will asked me, "What do we want to do about him?"

I considered. "Ames. Scare the piss out of him."

I never got the exact details, but twenty minutes later, our feline companion returned. The were-cat was grinning toothily. "He won't be back tonight." Ames assured us.

At a quarter past 11, we set out towards the western part of the city, keeping to the back alleys. All of us were sporting long black cloaks to help us blend in when we reached our destination. They would also help with the ruse that we had planned in advance to avoid being followed.

As the five of us turned a corner, Rick quickly cast a simple spell by the name of Audible Illusion. It created a phantom sound that traveled in any direction of the caster's choosing. In this case, the sound of our party walking and chattering with each other was sent down the opposite alley. As quickly and quietly as we could, we weaved down two tight bends in rapid succession. Ten minutes later, Will cast the same spell and we did it all over again in a different alley. If we were being followed before, it was far less likely now.

We arrived at the Temple of Koroth at five minutes 'til midnight. It was a smaller temple, able to handle around seventy-five parishioners. Nine rows of pews were split up the middle to form a central aisle. Including us, only about thirty-five people were in attendance. We blended in well; traditional garb for worshippers of Koroth was black on more black.

Stoically, we listened to the sermon of Koroth. He wasn't a full god as such, more of a powerful demon lord or underworld demi-god for those interested in greed, merciless negotiation, and advantageous accords. The theme of the night seemed to be about getting revenge in quasi-legal

and profitable ways. I was afraid that Toby would snap at some point, but he seemed fairly neutral. That look was not uncommon on the face of a minotaur that was simply bored.

At the end of the half hour service, the congregation was dismissed. Most people headed out via the front entryway, but a select few walked past the altar to disappear behind a partition at the rear of the apse. Ames stealthily made their way towards the front of the temple to see what was happening there. The rest of us stayed kneeling in the pew, 'praying'.

In minutes, we were the only people left in the nave area. Just as I was starting to get restless, there was a loud 'thump' and a hissed curse. Quickly we stood and made our way towards the area behind the apse.

Ames was standing, looking down at the weakly groaning heap of human flesh writhing on the ground. The were-cat held a heavy, slightly bloody candle holder in their paws. Defensively, the cat murmured, "I didn't know the password."

Quickly we bound and gagged the guard that our friend had waylaid. He had a minor scalp wound, but he looked like he would be alright in a couple of hours. Ames relieved the poor man of his keys, and we opened up the sacristy.

A quick search of the ritual preparation area unveiled exactly nothing out of the ordinary. We were about to beat a hasty retreat, when Toby stopped us. His keen minotaur senses had ferreted out a tunnel behind the wall of a vestment closet. Ames found the intervening secret door, and made quick work of the opening mechanism.

Stone steps, illuminated by recently lit and firmly ensconced torches, flowed downwards in a tight spiral. Toby led the way, as stealth didn't seem to be an option in such narrow and bright quarters. We crept downstairs until we reached what was almost certainly a crypt.

Sarcophagi lined the walls to our left and right. But the most interesting feature of the room was a thick, blood red curtain directly in front of us. It seemed to divide the top of this chamber from the bottom of the next. There were people on the other side of the partition, conducting a rather loud and disturbing ritual of some sort.

"OH DEMON LORD OF BARGAINS, DEMON LORD OF CONTRACTS, DEMON LORD OF GAIN! OH GREAT KOROTH! WE BESEECH THEE TO STRIKE THE GREAT BARGAIN AND BRING ABOUT THE END OF DAYS, THAT WE MIGHT WALK AT YOUR SIDE AND WITNESS THE SUBJUGATION OF THOSE UNWORTHY OF THE FINAL NEGOTIATION!"

We traded glances with each other. Smaller and less stable religions had more than their fair share of doomsday cults. But what did any of this have to do with a plot against the royal family?

"OH DISCOVERER OF HIDDEN PROFIT, OUR VOICES CARRY UNTO YOU IN DESPERATION! RID THIS WORLD OF THE POOR AND WORTHLESS, AS THEY CANNOT AFFORD THE COST! RID THIS WORLD OF THE WEAK AND STUPID, AS THEY CANNOT SURVIVE THE CULLING!"

As a group, we started to creep closer to the curtain. If we timed our charge right, we could catch these cultists by surprise. Assuming we could capture one of them alive, someone like an inner circle member rather than the clueless door guard upstairs, we would be able to interrogate them. Shock and awe was the best way to accomplish that.

"OH BROKER OF THE FIRST ACCORD, PLEASE EXECUTE THE DIVINE LOOPHOLE AND SEND THINE DEMONIC SERVANTS TO PANOS! ALLOW THE SECRET OF THE GREAT CONTEST TO BE KNOWN TO

THY SERVANTS! RAISE THE VEIL, AND ALLOW US TO SEE!”

The thick red curtain shot up to the ceiling with such speed and power that we were helpless to do anything but watch. It must have been some sort of spring loaded or counterweighted mechanism. Luckily, the contingent in the adjoining chamber was just as surprised as we were.

Now would be a good time to explain something. Koroth was fond of loopholes. Although the accord of the gods prevented demons, devils, angels, and avatars from occupying space on Panos, only the gods themselves could read the fine print. Koroth might not be able to send his demons to Panos, but he **could** enhance, reshape, twist, and reform residents of Panos into demon-like beasts. These were known as the ‘Sacrificed’ of Koroth.

Of the seven figures gathered in the opposite crypt, three of them were Sacrificed humans. The first seemed to be fairly new to the fold... the only obvious mutation on him was a pair of bony nubs sprouting from the top of his bald skull. Clearly some day these would be horns, but not today. The second creature was far worse off. The flesh of her fingers had been stripped away, and the bones filed into razor sharp claws. The final Sacrificed man could barely be recognized as a man at all. His skin was cherry red from being slowly baked in the unholy fires of Koroth’s love. The creature’s left hand was missing, and the bones of his wrist had been carved into a jagged spearhead. His two normal eyes were blind, but a grotesque third eye sprouted from the center of his forehead.

Compared to those three, the two longsword wielding psychopaths and curse spitting clergymen seemed almost normal.

Toby bellowed at the abominations, tears rolling down the sides of his golden-brown furred cheeks. I already knew that there was no retreat from this fight. For once, I got the jump on my foes and it was actually effective. My Web shot across the now-conjoined room and glued one of the swordsmen and one of the priests to some nearby sarcophagi.

As the men struggled to free themselves, Ames and Toby drew their weapons. Rick opted for a fast spell to hurl at the closest Sacrifice. A volley of Magic Missiles pelted the deformed female, causing her to shriek and hesitate. Will started casting a longer, more complex spell, hoping to catch multiple opponents in a Fireball.

That was a mistake.

The priest of Koroth finished a rapid incantation and flicked his hand towards Will, in a slashing motion. A fountain of blood sprung from my friend’s chest. He screamed with pain as a phantom force struck him. It was like a barbed bullwhip had cut a diagonal line through Will’s robe and chest. He fell to his knees, spell never completed.

Ames intercepted the robed human swordsman before he could reach the mage backline. The cat was so close to us, executing their normal dodging style would have opened us up to attack. So the were-cat became an imposing presence; parrying, riposting like a fine fencer.

With the screams of Will in his ears, the weeping minotaur bellowed and charged the Sacrifices. The hesitating female was shouldered aside, still not in the fight. Toby lowered his head to engage the novice Sacrifice, wanting to make an example out of him. Horns met bone nubs. Horns won. The creature’s neck snapped back. Just in case he wasn’t dead on impact, the lightning quick flash of Toby’s broadsword took his heart, mid-beat.

The crimson skinned, spear-handed Sacrifice was turning to charge Toby’s flank. I quickly palmed the guts from my component pouch into my fingers, and sent my Acid Bolts into his side. They impacted.

Damage was clearly done as burnt flesh gave way to a pearly white rib cage on his right side. But it was as if the creature felt no pain at all.

My webs were being torn through by the angry flash of a longsword. Those two would be freed soon, and the odds would be very much against us.

Wisely, Will chose a purely defensive spell as his next incantation. Mirror Image. Soon there were four Wills, all on their knees and bleeding. The female Sacrifice leaped forward and slashed through the throat of one of the copies of Will. Luckily, it simply dissipated, as she guessed wrong on the first try.

The priest that was free hurried to levy a Curse against the minotaur, attempting to strip him of the protections of Aro-Remset. There was a brief dimming of the light in the room, as the power of the gods themselves fluxed and contested. In the end, Toby looked no worse off, and the priest screamed in frustration.

However, winning on the spiritual plane was only half the battle. The crazed Sacrifice threw a powerful 'punch' with its spear-hand upon reaching Toby's side. The bull man couldn't raise his shield in time, and that jagged shard of bone penetrated chainmail and flesh alike. The paladin gasped as bone ground against bone, and his shield dangled limply from the straps. His shoulder was devastated, the nerves running up and down his arm numbed. But that didn't stop the enraged, teary eyed minotaur from twisting away and levelling his sword at this new threat.

Ames was a contrast to the chaos happening all around them. Despite two of their friends wounded and crying out, despite two more foes breaking free of my webs, the were-cat was a cool and calculated killer. The feline forced the swordsman into a desperate thrust. In a flash, three things happened: Sidestep. Counter slash. And the swordsman's head tumbled to the stone floor.

Rick, the priest, and myself all started incantations at the same time. It was going to come down to spell selection and target.

Rick chose wisely once again, going for a quick spell, and one of my personal favorites. A Force Bolt sent the female Sacrifice tumbling back into the opposite half of the crypt, just as those grotesque bone claws sliced at the face of Will's illusion, causing yet another to fade from reality.

Unfortunately, the priest had been tracking which Will was likely the real one. Still rolling from an attempted dodge of the Sacrifice's claws, the small human never saw the second blow coming. Again the Pain spell connected, flaying my friend's flesh open from left buttock to left shoulder blade. Will and his Mirror Image collapsed in pain, both laying on the ground bleeding and twitching.

I had opted for power. It was slow, and I was going to feel the drain keenly, but I knew that a second priest in this fight might mean the end of us all. Fur rubbed against brass, and the conduit was formed. Unwittingly, Rick had set up the perfect shot. Just as the second priest broke free of my Web, the female Sacrifice staggered into view. My Lightning Bolt fired, catching the Sacrifice first. After the Magic Missiles and the Force Bolt, she had nothing left to resist the surge of electricity, and fell to the ground, dead and smoking. The unfortunate priest that had been hobbled the entire fight found even more bad luck. My Lightning Bolt caught him once in the chest, rebounded off of a stone coffin behind him, and struck him again in the spine. His heart stopped and he too fell.

Ames smoothly picked up the swordsman who had just freed himself, making sure to stay between him and our fallen ally. If anything, this one seemed less skilled than the last, quickly suffering minor cuts to the forearm and left hip. However, although I knew the were-cat's blade was poisoned, the

worshiper of Koroth showed no ill effects. Perhaps it was a perk of devotion to a demon lord.

Toby gamely battled on with one arm, and forced the veteran Sacrifice back a couple of paces. He even scored a slash against the creature's collarbone, but the leathery skin didn't bleed. Soon after, that deformed bone-spear of a hand drove downwards and into the minotaur's left calf. The chain absorbed most of that blow, but still there was some penetration, blood, and pain. Toby was being picked apart.

The priest had exhausted their complement of minor spells, and decided that he had to take Rick out of the fight. Holding up a rod of iron, he pointed it at the tall human and started to call upon Koroth to invoke an unholy paralysis on the mage.

Right at that moment, he probably didn't expect to meet a friend of mine: Rock.

Rock impacted with the priest's face solidly, sending a pair of teeth flying. I stalked forward, following my own throw. I wasn't fully drained of intelligence at that point. I could have perhaps managed a minor spell or two without putting myself past the point of no return.

But I was mad.

Rick was mad too, but thinking far more clearly than I. He was moving forward as well, but fumbling with something in his belt pouch as he moved. From just five paces away, the human hurled a small clay pot at the final Sacrifice. It shattered against the mutated man's hip. The holy water soaked into those black robes and then burned the unholy thing from the inside. Unlike mundane pain, the Sacrifice reacted to the divinely inflicted blow. It screeched like a banshee, smoke starting to rise from melting flesh.

That was the opening Toby needed. The horizontal arc of the minotaur's broadsword sliced under the Sacrifice's arm and through most of the ribcage. The creature's muscles seized up, and it slowly slid backwards off of Toby's blade.

I heard rather than saw Ames take their opponent down with an adder-quick trust through the eye socket that left the tip of the cat's sword sticking out of the back of the human's skull. I heard Toby being helped over to Lay Hands on Will, and then urged to use healing magic on himself to save his arm.

By the time anyone thought to check up on me, I had raised Rock above my head with both calloused green hands. For the seventh time I brought my old friend crashing down on the priest's splintered skull, punishing the long-dead cleric for hurting my little friend. The shocked silence allowed me get the eighth blow in. I was restrained by Rick and Ames as I raised Rock for the ninth time.

Given my emotional state, Rick took charge. "Ames, go quickly and find the City Guard. Tell them that army envoys have been injured fighting members of an apocalypse cult. Say that you need help securing the area right away, and you need backup from General Stanish Coleton's people, including a combat medic. Just Stanish's people."

The cat nodded, and was gone in an instant.

Rick was able to calm me down, as I shook from fading anger and far too much adrenaline. I had enough intelligence left to help him pack and bandage Will's wounds as best we could. We also wrapped Toby's shoulder and leg tightly. The healing magic had gone a long way towards stopping the bleeding, and it almost certainly saved Will's life; his breathing was shallow, but steady.

We had a healing potion, but it was far too risky to try to force it down the small human's throat in his condition. Rick offered it to Toby, who said it would be a waste as he couldn't feel his arm anyway, and he was in stable condition. So leaving Toby to cradle Will in his lap, the two of us searched the crypt.

Hidden in a nook, there was a leather bound diary. Rick confiscated it. There was a small chest, but it was just filled with ritual fetishes and simple weapons. We didn't loot the bodies since they were evidence, and it might look bad if envoys of the Crown and Arcane University were caught patting down corpses.

As I cleaned Rock with a flask of water and put my old friend away, Rick skimmed through the pages of the dark cleric's tome. He made it through several dozen pages while we waited for help. The tall human's eyes widened when he found a somewhat recent passage. "Listen to this." The human cleared his throat, and started reading:

"We have found an ally. Duke Harrington has always been a friend of the order, but has now proven himself a friend of the cause. His reach and financial help will allow us to fulfill the will of Koroath, and soon we will strike a series of shrewd deals. These covenants will allow us to walk beside our demonic brethren in the flesh. The Duke's brilliant plan will open a path between realms. None of Panos will be spared. Praise be to Koroath."

I grunted. "Don't think that enough for courts. But good start."

Rick shook his head. "Where does one start when faced with the ravings of a zealot?"

I said, "The money. Always the money."

The tall human nodded, and tucked the diary into his backpack. A short time later, Ames arrived with reinforcements from the City Watch. They moved quickly to secure the crime scene, and the temple itself. One look at the horribly mutilated demonic bodies was enough for them to take our side. A mustached and helmeted watchman said, "The General's men are on the way. Don't you worry."

The guards went a step further than we did in our search. They cracked open the sarcophagi. Most of them only had skeletal remains, but there was an outcry when one of the newer vessels was opened.

"Tis the good witch Dorris Pine! Fetch the inspectors."

We were told that a vexing missing persons case, now confirmed as a murder, had been big news recently. Dorris Pine was a well known magus in Royal Moffit. She had been an advocate for more transparency in the tax system, a vocal proponent of minimum pay being established for child labor, a provider of training for street thugs and criminals in order to rehabilitate them, and was the face of a number of other popular movements. A couple of weeks ago she had disappeared, and blood was found at her residence.

Our mustached watchman told us, "Let's get your wounded friends upstairs, this room is going to get crowded right quick!"

We carefully moved the human and minotaur upstairs, and met the General's men as they arrived in the temple's sacristy. The combat medics were able to cast a couple more minor healing spells on Toby and Will. With their help and under their protection, our group travelled to the Temple of Aro-Remset.

The clerics and paladins of Toby's temple immediately took our wounded friends in for convalescent

care. We were complimented on stabilizing them so quickly, and assured that they would be fine in a few days under the healing influence of Aro-Remset.

Only upon hearing this news did Rick break down and start sobbing. He had held things together emotionally until Will was out of danger, but the near-death experience of his long time partner clearly took a toll. Ames held her friend until the crying turned into relieved laughter. The human wiped his eyes and said, "It was his turn to do inventory when we get back home. He's not getting out of it this easily."

Each one of us thanked the attending clerics, and then we rendezvoused with our guards who had been patiently waiting outside. They had sent a runner to report the situation up the chain of command, and assured us that they were with us for as long as we needed them. Quickly, our group made its way to the Palace, still under military escort.

We were greeted at the gates by none other than General Stanish Coleton himself. He shook each of our hands. "I don't have all of the details yet, but whatever you discovered sent Harrington into hiding. He's nowhere to be found in the Palace. We've raided his quarters and are conducting a search right now. Come on."

The three of us were led to the private apartments in the north wing of the palace. Stopping just outside of the Duke's quarters, Stanish called for the commanding officer on the scene. The lieutenant that was leading the search saluted Stanish, and then reported. "There's no sign of him sir. He did leave a brief note." The young officer handed over a scrap of parchment. After a parting salute, the young officer rejoined the search party.

Grimly, the General read the note aloud for our benefit.

"It's already too late. You will burn."

Chapter 15

We made our report directly to the Royal family, handing over the cultist's diary as the first piece of evidence against the Duke. The King was still in shock about the betrayal of his trusted advisor. The Queen, of course, was already prepared for such news.

Queen Ginger made it clear that our help was still needed, "In light of this betrayal and the real probability of an ongoing conspiracy against the crown and against the people of Panos as a whole, we ask for your continued diligence. Whatever plan has been set in motion by Duke Harrington and the doomsday cultists of Korothe must be discovered. If it is still a credible threat, their plans must be foiled. Our material aid will continue to be made available to you. Should you require financial or martial resources, you need but ask."

Putting her money where her mouth had just been, the Queen issued Ames 50 gold coins to cover any research expenses. After taking our leave, we stopped at the front gate of the palace to get organized.

I said, "Someone gotta tell Hemitath. Rest gotta find out more stuff and things."

Rick nodded. "I'll get word back to the Headmaster, but Sorch... you need to rest and recover. It's dawn and you're drained."

I grunted. "No time. Kitty look after me. Will rest after next stop."

Ames squeezed my shoulder. "Where's that Sorch?"

I pointed south. "Where all shady people go."

As Rick headed back to the teleporter, we made our way to the docks. They were remarkably similar to the ones in Limt, just on a more massive scale. We started with the public shipping manifest, trying to see if there was somewhere in particular that the Duke might run. I paused when I saw a certain name.

"Blue Briar."

My companion peered at the manifests. "I don't see that ship on the manifest, what is it?"

I shook my head. "Not what. Who." I poked a finger at the line of the manifest that I was talking about:

'The Sea Devil - Captain Blue Briar - Destination: Limt - Dock: 43C'

I explained, "He guy who ship to Shaman for me. He friend of bartender I know. Gots eyes everywhere on coast."

Ames glanced at the map hanging next to the manifest. "Dock 43 is east of us. Let's go."

We made our way past over a hundred ships of every size and shape imaginable. I still appreciated the ocean and those who sailed her, however unlike the view from my apartment in Limt, the sheer volume of ships made the Royal Moffit port seem terribly cluttered. Details were more difficult to pick out. A lot of the charm was lost.

We reached Dock 43. The Sea Devil was easy to spot because, unlike most of the rest of the port, there were only a couple of ships in their berthings. As we approached, one of the human deckhands

called down, "What ye fer then?"

I shrugged and looked to Ames. The feline called back, "We need Captain Blue Briar."

"So does every bitch in every port we visit, and they all leave satisfied but limping. This gonna be that kind of visit?"

Instead of answering verbally, the were-cat held up the small bag of gold that we had been granted by the Crown. The feline jingled the coins loudly.

The man peered down at us for a few long moments. Then he disappeared from the railing area.

I frowned. "If he come back with crossbow..."

Ames slapped my shoulder. "We can dive under the boat. You can swim, right?"

"I no tell about Silverfish?"

"Wasn't that more pulling on a rope than swimming?"

I grunted. "Sure. But yes, can swim."

Suddenly, there was an orc staring down at us. His salt and pepper hair was wild, as in if the wind had been blowing in it for years and he never bothered to comb it. He had a green-gray complexion and brownish blue eyes. The word that best described his overall appearance was 'salty'.

Blue Briar stared down at us, then focused all of his attention on me. "Wat you want?" he barked, in Orcish.

I answered in my native tongue, "You know Shaman in Jeywafa clan, yes?"

The captain grunted. "Yeah. So?"

"He friend. I send money to him with you."

The other orc's eyes widened a bit. "Oh. You **dat** orc. Weirdo. Giving away shanies. Wat you want?"

"Want yer smarts. Will pay."

Another grunt. Then the gangplank was lowered and we were welcomed aboard. Well, we were allowed on board.

Captain Blue Briar took us into his cabin and closed the door. It was a small, spartan room. The walls were covered in maps and charts. Oddly, the room was lit by a blue glass canary sitting on the captain's desk, enchanted with a Light spell. I figured that, much like my pot, this was one of those minor magic items that apprentice mystical craftsmen make. It cast the entire room in an azure hue.

The other orc switched to the Common tongue for Ames' benefit. "Don't need spare change. Help crazy orc as pity case. Ask."

I wondered if after so many dealings over the years, this orc had developed a friendship with Shaman and I was reaping the benefit. I didn't question our good fortune aloud however.

"Korothe cult in bed with Duke. Duke on run now, but say bad things gonna happen. You hear about bad things?"

The Captain looked between Ames and myself, then sighed. "Should have known it be dangerous

question. Yeah. Heard about bad things.”

My feline companion rumbled, smoothly, “It goes no further than this, nobody will know you spoke to us. What bad things?”

The other orc rubbed his chin. “Dunno detail. Just know leaving in morning, before all goes wrong. Listen. Parade perfect time for thief, yes? People, money, tourists. Then why thieves leave city? They know what we dunno.”

I tilted my head. “Thief tell you dis?”

Blue Briar nodded. “And I see with own eyes. Flood of scum pay for ship out. I tell other ships around, they go. Soon next dock hear, and next, they all go. Fine for early leave nothin’ compared to dyin’.”

Ames asked, “Are there any thieves left that we could... persuade to give us details.”

The Captain smiled suddenly, perhaps seeing an opportunity to get a little payback. “Yes. Oh yes. One. You say you gots gold, yes?”

Because of the nature of this potential informant, half of our research money ended up going to the Captain as a matter of formality. After getting the name and description of our target, we bid Blue Briar a good voyage, and left the docks. The two of us headed just north of the warehouses and fish processing plants, to where the bulk of these big buildings created a perpetual shadow. I stayed far behind Ames so that my less subtle nature wouldn’t intrude on the feline’s expert skulking.

It was well into the afternoon now. After hours of stalking and hunting, we found our quarry. If you were to pass this particular human on the street, you might consider frequenting higher quality streets. The mousy brown hair, pocked face, and often-broken nose did the man no favors. He was leaning up against the side of an abandoned warehouse, waiting for someone.

I approached him from the right, not bothering to hide a menacing glare. Those sharp eyes widened. The human turned to run, but ran headlong into a mass of fur and leather.

Ames snarled, “Hello Earl. Blue Briar sends his regards.”

And with that the were-cat drove their short sword three inches into the human’s left leg.

The man screamed and fell down on his ass, raising both hands to shield his face from what he presumed was an oncoming beatdown. Ames rolled their eyes, and slowly extracted the blade from Earl’s cedar pegleg.

When no pain followed the attack on his false limb, the lowlife peeked out from between his fingers. I had joined the were-cat at that point, folding my arms across my chest and peering down at the pitiful excuse for a human.

“Waddya want?! I told Blue Briar I’d pay ‘im back! I’t only 20 lousy gold. I woulda had it to ‘im last week but he weren’t here an’ I spent it on... uh... My next batch of product.”

I looked at Ames and said, gutturally, “Let me crush it.”

The were-cat smiled, all sharp teeth and malice. “Not yet killer. Let’s see if he plans to be useful.” Ames crouched a bit so that the human’s vision was mostly filled with pearly white fangs. “We bought your debt from Blue Briar for 25 gold after factoring in the vig. We paid a premium because we **really** wanted to have this little chat with you. If you prove yourself useful, we’ll forget about

your debt to us entirely. If not, I feed you to him.” Ames jerked a fuzzy thumb up at me.

I commented, “I likes the eyeballs best.”

The human quickly made efforts to get on our good side. “O-o-of course! You tell me what ya need, I’ll make sure it happens.”

Ames straightened their back, and then imitated my posture by folding those fuzzy arms over their chest. The swaying of that fluffy white tail was a slight distraction for me, but Earl was wholly focused on Ames’ words. “The rats are fleeing the ship, Earl. There’s no way all of these lowlifes are leaving town just before every tourist, noble, and country bumpkin floods into town. Not unless something big and unfortunate was happening. What is it?”

Now Earl looked truly frightened. “If anyone knows t-that ya heard it from me...” he trailed off into silence.

I asked Ames, “I eats now?”

The man quickly made up his mind. “This festival thing is bad news. Everyone’s getting out of town cause we hear there’s gonna be a body count, see? Some kind of magical trap or something, can’t be avoided. It’s supposed to be an inside job. So you see? There’s no leverage for us. It’s all danger, no upside. I’m on a wagon out of here tonight, after I dump the rest of my... product.”

I frowned. “How you know trap magical?”

Earl looked surprised. I might have been breaking character a little bit by showing that much intelligence. But he was already terrified of us, so he answered rapidly.

“Cause that bigwig that’s on the run, that Duke guy. He was hiring guys like us, but only if we knew magic!”

Ames turned to me. “Like the illusionist spy.”

I replied, “Dorris Pine.”

The feline’s eyes widened, “She worked with street criminals to try to rehabilitate them. The woman even taught some of them the basics of magic so that they might pull themselves out of the gutters. She would have known exactly the types he wanted to hire; might have even been mistaken for a potential recruit on the streets. She found out.”

“Died for it.”

We both looked back down at the peg legged human.

Earl looked back up at us owlshly. “So umm... can I go now?”

We cut the human loose and hurried back to the Palace. The King and General were both unavailable, but the Queen was happy to see us right away. We met in our staging area. When we told her that the Arcane University’s celebration might be the stage for a massacre, she was not happy.

The country-born monarch drawled, “Y’all convinced me, don’t worry. But I kin hardly send millions of folks packin’ because someone somewhere might be fixin’ to blow some o’ them up. It would be chaos, hundreds would die, tens o’ thousands robbed or worse. And seein’ an evacuation, they might jus’ start killing innocents while they scamper anyhow.”

She had several good points.

Ames paced between the rows of beds. “We don’t have specific names for you, or how they plan to do it. But you’re right, we have no idea what happens if we cancel the celebration. It’s probably safer if the enemy is unaware how close we’ve come to the truth. We need to find the real threats.”

Ginger nodded. “I’ll order th’ army ta help the city guard. We’ll start with huntin’ street crooks who’re still around. That ain’t out of character b’fore a big celebration. We catch th’ right ones, I reckon they might lead us up th’ ladder.”

I grunted. “We get all back together. Find way to hunt them down. Gots list of components needed.”

The Queen paused, concerned by my primitive manner of speech. “Get some rest, sugar. I’ll get word ta Hemitath, get yer mage friend sent back. And I’ll send carriages ta scoop up yer other two companions and whatever ya need on that there list. Everything an’ everyone ’ll be here early in the mornin’.”

I was about to protest, but Ames squeezed my shoulder. A gentle nod was all it took to convince me that the were-cat’s judgement was probably better than my own right now. Ginger gave Ames a little peck on the cheek. Then the monarch took my list of material components and made her exit.

I laid down in the nearest bed and fell asleep within minutes. The drain and lack of rest had both taken their toll, leaving my mind helpless to defend itself against the vivid nightmare that assailed me. When the Engine consumed the world this time, I actually felt relief. At least the oblivion would end the nightmare and allow me to rest.

Chapter 16

I slept for a solid thirteen hours. By the time I cracked my eyes open, the fourth floor of the southwest tower was filled with people. Very loud people.

Will was insisting that these very loud people leave him alone. "I'm telling you, I've had two nights and a full day of being bombarded with healing from clerics, and paladins, and traditional medics, and I think even a wandering shaman! Leave me be! Oof!"

The 'oof' was probably because I had slipped out of bed and given the little human a huge bearhug. He squirmed until I finally let him go.

"Alive, good." I said, hoarsely.

Rick snickered. "He is unless you squeeze the life out of him. Why don't you do your preparation and intellect enhancement Sorch. I didn't come up with much at the University, but we're organizing what little information we have."

After a full round of enhancement, I felt much more like myself. The King sent up a regal breakfast, along with apologies that he had been busy with military matters yesterday. I asked if the army activity was pertinent to our investigation. The messenger informed us that there was an unknown militia in the northeastern territories. As that was Duke Harrington's lands, they had to respond immediately; but when they arrived the force had already fled. We thanked the herald, and enjoyed a feast of eggs, bacon rashers, fried carrots, a light and refreshing chilled honey wine. Dessert was preserved peaches, of course.

Well fed and fully rested now, I was up to helping the others to pour through the records that the Arcane University had collected on our wayward Duke.

One particular piece of information jumped out at me. "It says that he lost his arm and got his scars in a magical attack on the family's carriage. The same attack killed both his parents, Mary and Horace Harrington. Witnesses say that it was like a fireball, but with solid force behind it. It splintered the carriage, killed the horses, severed the Duke's arm, and threw his unconscious body from the blast."

Toby said, "Wait."

We waited. It was a few moments before he said anything else.

The minotaur murmured, "What if..." He cleared his throat, and then said more loudly, and with more confidence, "What if it wasn't an attack at all? In one fell swoop, Marley goes from regal fop to the most powerful landowner south of Ice House. But it cost him his arm. It **cost** him his arm."

Rick thumped the dining table. "As a sacrifice to Koroth, maker of bargains. I don't think we can prove it, but given recent events, you may well be right Toby."

The minotaur nodded, "That means the evidence of his corruption might go back years."

We all took a moment to let that sink in. Our task might have gone from monumental, straight to impossible.

I made the executive decision, "Celebrations start tonight. We need to work with what we have and

hope that there's something useful here."

We spent another hour learning everything we could about Duke Harrington. He was never known as a combatant or spellcaster. He was a shrewd businessman that relied on spies and intelligence networks to be effective. As useful as it was to know one's enemy, we were no closer to figuring out his grand scheme.

Will mentioned, "We should consider setting a stop point. If we don't have anything solid, Toby will need to help his Order prepare. We'll be more useful on the street, ready to react to any threat. Rick and I have been asked to replace a couple of mages who haven't shown up for their role in the celebration. So we can be right in the thick of things."

It was my turn to say, "Wait."

All eyes turned to me. "The celebration. The good witch. Recruiting underworld mages. Access to somewhere under the castle. More mages gone missing."

I rolled it around in my head. A gathering of arcane power. A cover up. And my nightmare.

My nightmare...

"No."

I murmured the word with a sudden, sickening realization.

I felt a paw on my shoulder. Ames was shaking me gently, "Sorch? What is it?"

I snarled, "No! I'm so stupid. Hemitath was wrong. My nightmare. It wasn't some kind of allegory about power corrupting and a great evil... it wasn't even about the Voodoo Engine. It was the rest. The others!"

I turned to Rick and Will, "Right now, where are the Arcane Syphons? Of the eleven used to build the Arcane University, I know where exactly one is: The Voodoo Engine in the middle of my village. Where are the rest?"

Rick turned to Will. Neither of them had an answer.

I insisted, "We need to know now. Right now. Toby, when they picked you up did they pick up a bunch of components from a list-"

The minotaur cut me off, "It's on the third bed on the left, Sorch."

I rushed out of the kitchen area briefly to grab the bag of material components that Ginger promised. As everyone looked on, I took out a strand of copper wire. Closing my eyes, I murmured the incantation for Max's Message.

Keeping the image of Hemitath in my mind, I sent: 'Need help. Need to know where every Arcane Syphon is right now. Celebration may be trap. Possibly traitors in University.'

Moments later, I got the reply: 'Syphons building infrastructure for celebration in United Diben, Limt, Ice House, Royal Moffit, Eastern Hook. I'm coming to you.'

I related what I sent and the Headmaster's reply aloud.

"Rick, Will, if there are Syphons in the city can you find out where they are supposed to be deployed? I assume for building platforms, clearing parks, building footbridges... are they accounted

for?”

Will nodded, “We’re on it.” The pair hurried to find and ask the Court Magician, who would have likely been informed of such an undertaking.

I ran my fingers roughly through my hair. “Toby, Hemitath is teleporting in, could you meet her at the front gates and bring her back here?”

When he had gone, I slammed a fist into the table. And again. Ames restrained my arm and said, “Stop.”

I sighed. “I had all the pieces of the puzzle yesterday! Why didn’t I see it?”

The feline reminded me, “You were running on no sleep, and nearly fully drained of your enhanced intellect. Nobody else put it together either. And you didn’t know about the disappearing mages until just now. Assuming you’re right, what does this mean?”

I grit my teeth, “One or more incredibly powerful artifacts have been stolen by traitors inside of the Arcane University, hidden in places unknown, and they’re about to be used as a force of mass destruction.”

Ames blinked. “Oh.”

I furiously scribbled every detail, every assumption, and every guess down on a piece of parchment, just in case I was wrong and we had to rethink the situation. By the time I was done, people were arriving. All of them looked somber.

Toby and Hemitath arrived, followed seconds later by Rick and Will. “Update me, Sorch.” ordered the Headmaster in a polite tone. I had never seen her in adventuring gear. Even after a few hundred years, the archmage looked at home with a backpack, belt pouch, and high laced boots.

I took a deep breath, “If I’m right, we’re about to be told that nobody has any idea where the Arcane Syphons are in Royal Moffit.”

Rick said, grimly, “Nobody has any idea where the Arcane Syphons are in Royal Moffit.”

I sighed once again. “Headmaster, I’m afraid that the mages who have gone missing, as well as some who have access to controlling the teleportation system, are enemies of the Arcane University. At least two Arcane Syphons are missing... possibly every single one save for the Voodoo Engine at my village. We need to start ferreting out the traitors and seeing if we know where any of the Syphons are currently.”

The pale elf grew more pale as I explained the situation. I started to walk her through my logic, but she stopped me, already convinced.

Hemitath murmured, “I’ll contact Max. He’ll contact the other major cities but... assume you’re right.”

I nodded. “If I’m right, up to ten Arcane Syphons are somewhere underneath us right now. They’ve probably been enhanced by Koroth, and because they’re all grouped up together they also enhance each other. The goal being to syphon magic from a huge area, perhaps half the city or even the entire city. When the celebration starts, they can be used to dig out the supports under the castle, collapse roads, break the sea wall, and leave Royal Moffit’s remains in a smoking or flooded crater.”

I held up a hand to forestall the obvious next suggestion. “And if we cancel the celebration, a small

army of criminals and traitor mages will start unleashing arcane destruction on the city. That will leave us either fighting back with mundane means only and losing, or fighting back with magic and helping to feed the Syphons anyway.”

Will cursed. “And we have no idea where they are.”

Hemitath provided a glimmer of hope. “I may be able to find them. But I need to prepare a personal teleportation spell, and I need the help of your friend, Sorch. The one you call Shaman.”

That was the last name I expected to hear. “Shaman?! Why? How can he help?”

The Headmaster explained, “All of the Arcane Syphons are identical artifacts. They have the ability to link with each other and work together. That includes your Voodoo Engine. If your friend can get me in close proximity of it, I can use that as a way to find the others. All of them, their exact positions. But he needs to disguise me, shelter me, and give me a place to recover so that I can return home safely.”

Will asked, “Can you use that link to change their task?”

The elf shook her head. “For that, you still need to touch them, or at least one of them assigned to a particular task in close proximity. Direct access is the only way to shut them down.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll prepare Max’s Message for Shaman.” If I was right, this would mean that I wouldn’t have many major offensive spells for the upcoming battle, but it needed to be done. “We’ll all rest, meditate, and prepare to end this one way or the other. People in key positions need to know that although we’re pretending to go through with the parades, we won’t be using any more magic in the streets until we’re forced to respond. Ames, Toby, we need to tell the General, and the King, and the paladins and...”

Ames summed it up with, “Everyone.”

Toby nodded, “We’ll go tell everyone.”

As I saw Hemitath take out a strand of copper wire, I mentioned, “If they’re zealots, they might be impossible to find before they strike. But if they’re not zealots, they aren’t working for free. Tell Max to follow the money.”

The Headmaster gave me an odd little smile. But without further comment, she performed the incantation and sent a message to Max. Then, we rested.

It seemed strange to be laying down, having just discovered that a horrifically powerful force was going to tear the entire city apart. While squadrons of guards and soldiers were being quietly deployed, and the biggest celebration in modern history was being stealthily cancelled, we were all taking a nap. It was absolutely necessary, but at the same time somewhat ludicrous.

Once we had memorized the spells that we needed in order to make the plan work, I opened up my notebook to share sketches of the village and even a drawing of Shaman’s tent with Hemitath. I pinpointed the location on a continental map, and described all of the nearby landmarks. The aged elf needed to be as intimately familiar with the area as possible to avoid teleporting to the wrong location, or gods forbid, into solid rock.

As the Headmaster studied, I used Max’s Message to contact my oldest, dearest friend:

‘Need help. Sending elf archmage. Hide and protect her. Get her near Voodoo Engine. She can save

us all. Save the world.'

The mental reply was near immediate:

'You crazy. But fine. Better to be crazy in saved world than uncrazy in destroyed world. I protect your elf.'

Hemitath's eyes were distant as she dealt with her own Message. "Max got the reports back. All of the Syphons are missing. Our loyal people are helping to track down the traitors."

I rubbed my eyes. "Ten Syphons then. Alright. Shaman is with us, he's awaiting your arrival."

The archmage nodded. "Do you have anything with you that came from the area? It would greatly increase the accuracy of the Teleportation spell."

I reached into my pouch. Hemitath was now the proud guardian of Rock.

"Best of luck Headmaster."

"To us all, Sorch."

We all watched as the elf stood as still as possible. There were no gestures, no material components, just the murmuring of an incantation that would transport Hemitath halfway around the planet. The last syllable of her spell drifted across the room, and in an instant, she was gone.

Soon after, a message started to come to me. At first I was confused, since there was no way that the Headmaster had already accomplished her mission. Then I realized, it was Max:

'Followed the money. Caught pair that teleported Syphons. Once we are secure, will send more help. Happy hunting.'

I sent the reply, 'Thanks Max. Hemitath at my village. Using Voodoo Engine to find Syphons. Will need to rest after to teleport back. Good luck.'

I said aloud, as we all got suited up, "Max's people caught the traitors who teleported the Arcane Syphons via the University. He'll send help in a few hours after they clean up their own mess."

Toby snorted. "There might be nothing to teleport to in a few hours."

We packed everything that might be useful, leaving all non-essentials behind, and headed down the tower stairs. The front gates of the Palace seemed to be as good of a place as any to gather. It was central, with quick access to members of both the city watch and the General's people. The King and Queen arranged for two carriages and a mounted unit to be at our command. We kept a watchful eye out for anyone who might be trying to cause trouble.

After half an hour of pacing and idle complaining, something happened. Will stopped moving and looked out towards the horizon, eyes unfocused. A few seconds later, he relayed the gist of the message. "It sounds like all ten of them are in an underground cave, below the sewers. The entry point to the main cavern is directly under the open market on the west side of the city."

Toby turned to the corporal who was standing with us, "Do you know where that is?"

The soldier nodded. "Gully Circle, sir. There's sewer access, but I'm not sure about the caves."

The minotaur nodded. "You and your men come with us."

I told the gate guard, "Tell the King and the General where we're going, and to send help when they

have the spare people available.”

The five of us piled into the carriages. Our mounted escort took us west at a fair gallop. The sound of shod hooves on cobblestone was so loud, we didn't even hear the first explosion. A series of sinister magical attacks had been launched. The sound of the first conjured horror triggered the next rogue mage to unleash their devastation, and so on and so on, until smoke and thunder rolled through the once placid city streets. As we raced to stop the Duke's plans, his hirelings raced to fuel the Arcane Siphons while causing as much chaos as possible.

I tried to calculate our odds, but there were too many unknowns. I just hoped that Shaman and Hemitath were safe. And I hoped that we would have a chance, no matter how slim, to make a difference before the end came.

Chapter 17

We reached Gully Circle, a broad outdoor market. The center of the cobblestone circle was littered with carts of wares, ranging from foodstuff to hand crafted goods. It was surrounded by converted warehouses, serving as additional merchant space. When rain fell, the peddlers could still take shelter indoors. Today they were trying to weather a different kind of storm.

The crackling of a nearby lightning bolt had already sent merchants and customers alike scurrying for cover. Our escort acted with the kind of precision that one might expect from the most powerful standing army in the southern hemisphere of Panos. Our four mounted archers covered the roads into the Circle, while the two pikemen started patrolling the perimeter. The battlemage and medic found centralized cover near a stack of crates and dug in. Our remaining four swordsmen, one of them being the unit's corporal, led us over to the sewer entrance and pried up the heavy iron lid.

The corporal said, "We'll hold your exit and make sure you have a way out if you need it. Best of luck."

Toby squeezed the man's shoulder, and then threw his pack to me. I grunted under the weight, but swiftly realized why he did it. Although the sewer entrance was wide by our standards, it was a very tight fit for the minotaur. He did make it though after a brief struggle. I dropped his pack in, which was deftly caught. Then I climbed down the metal ladder that had been bolted to the sewer wall.

The smell was what you would expect, but not as intense as I had imagined. Once Will and Rick joined us and cast Light on their marker sticks, I understood why. The water and sludge were barely an inch deep, the remainder draining rapidly for some reason. Ames was the last to drop in, but the first to comment.

The feline noted, "We should go with the flow. If they've really bashed through the sewer wall or floor to reach some caves, it's unlikely that they had the time to seal things properly behind them."

Sewage normally flowed to designated areas of the ocean, which meant it should be travelling either south or west. But the flow in this stretch was oozing its way north. Not only had something been damaged, but the entire passage had sunk at least a few inches. The party trudged northwards as rapidly as we dared.

We found ourselves alone, save for a rat or two. Fifty paces up the tunnel, the only thing that had changed was the sound. A kind of rushing, churning din was growing in our ears. When the radius of our light reached the source of the noise, we understood why.

The sewage coming from the north was plummeting downwards, like a foul waterfall. Whatever magics used to open the tunnel were unsubtle, to say the least. Perhaps this was the work of Arcane Syphons. Perhaps it was a mad geomancer. Either way, the ground had been cracked, lifted, and then torn asunder. Once the bare rock had been exposed, a steep tunnel was conjured to join the sewers to the natural cave network, situated below us and to the east. We continued to follow the flow of sewage, careful not to slip. If any one of us fell and were swept away by the muck, there was no telling what danger that person would encounter.

The arcane passage gave way to a natural cavern. This chamber was at least ten paces high, and easily wide enough for fifteen men to walk shoulder to shoulder. Sewage poured onto the rocky floor before draining into the southern chamber and beyond the radius of our light. We had no plans to follow it, however, as we were far more interested in the sounds coming from the other direction.

Together we navigated the slight incline as the party moved towards the danger, a tendency often observed in the insane, the foolhardy, and adventurers.

As the broad cavern curled in a northeasterly line, a field of light could be seen in the distance. A mix of mundane torches and Light spells cast on rocks left us no shadows to skulk in. With a resigned sigh, Ames moved to the front of our group and stood shoulder-to-ribcage with the much taller paladin. Rick and Will tucked away their Light sticks, as they were about to become redundant.

Just as we were going to enter the well lit area, two humans appeared at the far side of the chamber, seemingly materializing from the left hand wall. Apparently there was a sharp turn into another cave or tunnel that we couldn't quite see yet. We crouched and held very still, taking advantage of the surrounding darkness and the frailness of human eyesight. Humans only see within their somewhat narrow visible spectrum. So when standing in the light and trying to peer into the shadow, they were nearly blind. The two warriors moved dangerously close. We saw every detail of their scale mail armor, the quality of their bastard swords, even the manner in which they tied their boots.

The man in the lead stopped suddenly. It might have been because of the short sword jutting from his neck, or the broadsword piercing his lung, it's difficult to tell. The second man started dancing in place as two full sets of Magic Missiles pummeled him from short range. My thrown dagger embedding in his abdomen didn't help the human's situation any. Both of them fell to the cave floor noisily, quite dead.

We unsheathed our weapons from the two bodies, and sprinted as quickly as possible through the well lit cave. Sure enough, this cavern linked to another via a short, downward sloping tunnel that was unnaturally round and smooth. We half ran, half slid down the connecting tunnel. It would have been a bad place to get trapped.

The next cave stretched to the northeast about forty paces. It was lit entirely by magic, as evidenced by the lack of fire's telltale flickering. I wish I could say that we were the only occupants of this chamber, but I haven't lied yet and I don't intend to start now.

Of the four Sacrifices waiting for us, one caught my eye immediately. The naked minotaur that faced us had jet black fur from horns to hooves. Only it wasn't exactly fur. Each patch of the glossy, warped stuff seemed to be petrified. It was as in if strands of hybrid wood and stone had grown from the forsaken creature's flesh. If this thing was ever a man, there was no evidence of it, and gender had long since ceased to be a function of that twisted body and mind. It carried only a stylized battleaxe, ancient runes seeming to crawl over its surface like living things. It was smiling.

Standing at the deformed minotaur's side was a humanoid of indeterminate species. The head had been twisted into... a neck-mounted three sided pyramid would be the most accurate way to describe it. Each 'facing' had a set of dead, pupilless eyes and a toothless mouth that gaped open and drooled. The rest of the thing's body was as normal as could be expected. It was protected by a suit of ragged hide armor made from some kind of humanoid flesh. The creature wielded a simple longsword.

At the midpoint of the cavern stood twin orcs that had undergone the same 'roasted skin' treatment that we had seen before, making their bodies red and leathery. They had hand crossbows at the ready, and short swords sheathed at their sides.

And standing behind them all, at the far end of the chamber, was the Duke. He was still dressed in crimson and gold, albeit a bit grubbier from his underground excursions. He wore no weapon, and

didn't look like he wanted any part of the upcoming conflict.

The human called out from the far side of the cave, still using those annoying over-pronounced tones. "I'm afraid you've arrived a bit too late. The mages up above have been most productive. They're waiting for a sign to evacuate the city before the end arrives... but I think that would be terribly boring. Besides, everyone needs to make sacrifices if we're to move forward in this life. Believe me. I know."

With that, he turned to his left and disappeared around a sharp bend at the far side of the cave.

Will, in a very heads up display, was already casting his first spell as Duke Harrington was finishing his taunt. He stepped in front of Rick and myself and held his ground. Twin crossbow bolts shattered against his Invisible Shield, giving us time to act.

Ames was squaring off, uncomfortably, against the pyramid headed abomination. Toby stepped up to the naked minotaur with confidence. I thought that he would be enraged or betrayed, and crying. But the paladin was smiling. This was a worthy foe.

I decided that since I had given up most of my offensive magic for utility, I would follow Will's lead and summon a Shield. But unlike the small human, I then advanced on the two crossbow wielding Sacrifices. Their fire was split now, as the leftmost orc tried to shoot at me under my Invisible Shield, but only accomplished sticking a bolt through the leather of my boot, missing flesh altogether. The other pinged a shot off of Will's Shield once again.

Rick's spell went off, but it wasn't one I had ever seen before... I guess I wasn't the only one learning new tricks at the Arcane University. A cluster of huge hail stones shot out of a portal that appeared upon one of the cave walls, pummeling the face and chest of the orc on the right. He screamed. The projectiles were not only hard and fast, but unnaturally cold. At least we knew that these two could feel mortal pain.

Toby wasn't faring as well. The first few testing strikes from each minotaur resulted in easy parries and blocks. But the first real blow from the Sacrificed beast tore a metal shard from Toby's shield. The act of blocking it numbed the paladin's arm from shoulder to wrist. The overhanded counterattack from the golden-brown bull was easily sidestepped. Following a moment of wary circling, the next attack from the black beast created a visible nick in Toby's broadsword. Toby's counter bounced off of that petrified ebony fur, kicking up a small cloud of dust much like crushed coal. My friend's smile had faded.

Ames was having a different set of difficulties with the abomination that they were faced with. The movements from the weirdly shaped Sacrifice seemed mechanical, almost clockwork. The exaggerated swings and almost comically over-executed dodges of this creature opened up huge gaps in its defenses. But every time Ames tried to take advantage, it was a trap. There was a longsword swinging at the feline's neck, or chopping towards their wrist. And when Ames dodged to one side or rolled, another pair of dead eyes was tracking the feline's movements. Any minor blows that the cat managed to land were turned aside by the Sacrificed's tough hide armor. White fur was already stained red with a couple of minor cuts that had slashed through the were-cat's own leathers. Ames parried and dodged, trying desperately to solve this puzzle.

The orc that I was approaching let his hand crossbow hang from a leather strap around his shoulder, opting instead to draw his short sword. Immediately, I started backpedaling towards my friends. The red skinned orc stared at me in disbelief and anger as the Sacrifice realized I was simply wasting his time. He had to make a decision: Go back to the crossbow, or stay with the sword.

As my orc was frozen with indecision, the other red skinned humanoid was struggling to reload their weapon. He never got the chance. Rick's Lightning Bolt stopped the creature, dead. Will dropped his Shield and started casting a quick spell. For the second time this afternoon, he caused Magic Missiles to rain in on a foe. The surviving Sacrificed orc howled in pain and outrage.

Toby's mouth was bleeding from the axe-handle that struck him across the snout. None of the golden brown minotaur's strikes had penetrated the strange fur armor of his opponent. At best he had bruised and winded the large Sacrifice, and even that was hopeful thinking. The next blow from the naked creature completely shattered Toby's shield, sending metal shrapnel everywhere and cutting his hand in the process.

My were-cat companion looked tired, bleeding from multiple shallow cuts, and no closer to besting this vexing foe. Ames stumbled after a desperate dodge, creating the opening that the pyramid-headed Sacrifice needed. That longsword flashed forward in a vicious stab. But the stumble was a trap, and the cat was already spinning to their right. Sadly, the stab was a feint, and quickly became an upward slash that threatened to tear into Ames' leg. Brilliantly, the were-cat predicted the feint into the trap. Planting their pivot foot, Ames committed. The feline stepped inside the effective arc of the Sacrificed creature's blade, and its wrist impacted ineffectually against the cat's kneecap. The pyramid headed abomination was low and overextended. With a feral snarl, Ames used both handpaws to drive the sword point down at their foe's exposed back. The spine was severed, and the Sacrifice moved no more.

The remaining orc saw two unshielded, unarmored mages and came to a decision. The Sacrifice charged, sword point leading. I quickly ran at the red skinned orc's side with my Invisible Shield raised. We impacted just two strides from Toby and Will, and fell to the cave's stone floor in a heap. I was dazed. It took me a few moments to realize what was going on. In a most un-magelike display, Will and Toby had piled onto the fallen orc. They were punching and kicking him as he tried to recover from our impact. Soon I was joining my friends, little dagger flashing as the three of us pinned and dispatched our enemy the old fashioned way.

The black furred minotaur must have realized that it was the last one standing. But if Toby was defeated, it was quite possible that the rest of us wouldn't be able to withstand the Sacrifice's furious assault. With a demonic bellow, the mutated creature swung its heavily enchanted axe at Toby's chest, looking to chop through blade, fur, flesh, and bone. The paladin's sword shattered, sending shards of steel through the air that sliced his face and neck. The golden brown furred minotaur stepped to the left as the impact happened, and the axe barely missed his right shoulder. With a bellow of his own, Toby thrust with the jagged foot of steel that still remained attached to his sword's hilt. It pierced mutated fur and leathery flesh to find the Sacrificed minotaur's dark heart.

Runed axe fell from numb hands. The final Sacrifice slowly toppled over, dying with a puzzled look on its face.

Almost by instinct, Toby bent to replace his broken weapon with the implement of his fallen foe. The minotaur's eyes widened as he got a good look at the axe's blade for the first time. "This is-"

The paladin's words were cut off by the sudden earthquake that shook the chamber so violently, nobody remained on their feet.

"This way!" I yelled after the tremor had passed. I scrambled to my feet and charged towards the corner where the Duke had made his exit, trusting my friends to follow.

The final two chambers of the cave network were surprisingly small, relative to the one that we just

came from. The cavern farthest from me contained what we were seeking: A tight stack of Arcane Syphons, ten strong. There was a circular opening that led from that final chamber into the larger cave that I had just stepped into.

The problem was, of course, the giant earth elemental that was rolling a boulder over the entryway. It was twice the size of Toby, with a crude granite head that nearly scraped the top of the cave. I didn't have a single spell that could affect that thing. Well, maybe one, but that scenario was wishful thinking.

I should say, the elemental was the big problem. The two smaller problems were the Bishop of Koroth in all of his demi-demonic glory, and Duke Harrington standing in an Abjuration circle.

The Bishop of Koroth was purple. There's really no other way to describe him. His deep purple skin was likely the result of rituals similar to what the Sacrificed had to endure. However there was no evident defects on Koroth's high priest. He held his ornate golden staff firmly, watching me. Waiting.

The Duke was completely ignoring everything else in the room. He simply stood in his Magic Circle and prayed aloud to Koroth for a meaningful and beneficial bargain. It wouldn't be a real barrier to any of us. But in the case of celestials and demons, it would act as a brick wall.

Of course the truly massive problem, which I think might be worth mentioning, was the hole that Duke Harrington was standing in front of. It was six paces in diameter, and the noise coming from it was unlike anything I had ever heard. It was as in if a thousand miners were working themselves to death, madly swinging pick axes at the stone until it shattered.

The rest of the party arrived just as the elemental sealed the Arcane Syphons in their own little chamber. I shouted to be heard over the din of rock being ground to powder. "They aren't collapsing the city, they're digging!"

The Bishop of Koroth laughed, the otherworldly sound easily carrying above the noise generated by the invisible miners. "Collapsing the city? There will be time for that. First we must call Koroth and his Court to witness our sacrifice and draw up a new covenant!"

The insane priest's words turned my guts to ice. Suddenly it all fell into place. This was the loophole.

It was Toby who voiced my suspicion. "You're digging a path to the Nine Hells? An actual, physical tunnel? Are you insane?!"

Koroth's Bishop just grinned. I noticed that his teeth were purple as well.

Despite being battered, bleeding, and spent, Toby and Ames started to charge the Bishop's position. Rick began an incantation, while Will and myself started to run towards the Duke.

The Bishop of Koroth slammed the butt of his ornate staff to the ground. It sent a shockwave through the earth that knocked us all from our feet. Duke Harrington fell to his knees, but continued praying. Even the earth elemental stumbled. Rick's spell was spoiled. Only the evil clergyman remained standing.

As we were regaining our bearings, the Bishop pointed at the ceiling in front of the now-blocked Syphon chamber. "Bring it down." he said.

The elemental cocked its boulder-sized fist and slammed it into the ceiling. The sound of fracturing stone could be heard echoing throughout the cavern, even over the din of manic arcane mining.

Toby had a new target. Once the minotaur regained his feet he charged towards the elemental,

brandishing his recently acquired war axe. Everyone thought that he would just be a distraction to the stone beast, but the first double-handed swing took a sizable chunk of rock out of the huge elemental's leg. The next swing from the conjured giant wasn't towards the ceiling, it was at Toby's head.

Ames stalked up to the Bishop himself, hoping that disrupting the elemental's puppetmaster would cause it to fall apart. The feline's swing, one that normally might have taken the Bishop's head off, connected with some kind of physical barrier. Ames' blow rebounded, and the were-cat was thrown back half a dozen paces. The feline shook their head, trying to get the cobwebs out.

Will shouted, "Overload the barrier!" The three of us started to throw everything we had at the Bishop. For my part, that was an Acid Bolt, which seemed to make some sort of impact before dripping to the ground. Rick's Force Bolt caused the shield to glow brightly for a moment, then fade. Will's Fireball, carefully aimed so as to explode behind the mad cleric and not catch Ames in the radius, seemed to surround the Bishop like an aura of chaotic flame before fading away.

All the while, the Bishop of Koroth was chanting. Whatever divine favor he was calling down, it was massively complex. He had been casting his clerical spell since before my Acid Bolt hit, and was continuing the incantation well after Will's flames had died out. I grit my teeth. If that shell he was standing in didn't have anti-magic properties, I could have shut him down in an instant.

My brain was swimming. I only had three spells left, and casting them would cripple my mind. Already I felt the tug of lethargy inside of my head. It wanted to let go of the burden of knowledge. It wanted to rest. I fought down that urge, as it was tantamount to surrender. I drew my dagger and started to move to a position between the Bishop and the Duke, intentionally leaving some uncertainty as to who my true target was.

Meanwhile, the minotaur was... winning. Somehow, he was not only able to dodge the relatively slow blows of the elemental, but he also landed telling blows up and down the creature's legs. The notches and cracks in the elemental's stone limbs were making it unstable. It started to wobble as it moved to pursue the mobile minotaur.

Ames was back in the fight. The fire in the cat's eyes told the Bishop, in no uncertain terms, that this was not over. A testing thrust impacted the shield... but this time there was no knockback. Abandoning their usual graceful style, the were-cat screamed in fury and started to hammer on the weakening shield with all of their might, over and over again.

When the Bishop of Koroth finished his long incantation, nothing seemed to happen for a moment. Then, a vortex of wind and gravity manifested just behind Toby. The purple eldritch portal howled and started to suck in everyone and everything around it. The paladin chopped the cave floor in front of him. The axe bit into the stone and held, for the moment. But it took all of the minotaur's strength to simply hold his ground. Nearby, Will and Rick were forced to flatten themselves against the stone floor to avoid being sucked in. "Pandemonium portal!" Rick shouted, the most succinct warning he could give under the circumstances. Ames and I were outside of the radius of the vortex, for better or for worse.

With the assault on its legs ended, the huge earth elemental went back to the task at hand. Massive fists pounded the cave ceiling until an ominous 'crack' reverberated throughout the chamber.

That's when half the cave disappeared in a hail of rock.

Toby reviewed his options, and opted for the unknown. Tugging his axe free, the paladin slid into the purple portal and disappeared. Rick and Will made split second calculations, and came to the same

conclusion. With ragged yells they got to their feet and leapt towards the gateway to Pandemonium. The gravity well and wind vortex sucked them in just before tons of stone buried the gateway, the elemental, and the boulder covering the entryway to the next chamber.

When the deafening sound of the cave-in had ended, the chamber was less than half of its original size. Only a single Light spell remained that was focused on an unburied area, and it struggled to illuminate everyone who was left.

The Bishop of Koroth cackled at the spectacular results of his spell. That is of course, until Ames finally broke through the field of force, and split his skull open like a melon. The lifeless body of the Bishop slid to the ground, golden staff clattering impotently as it fell from his dead hands.

“It doesn’t matter, you know.”

I turned to face Duke Harrington. I’m certain that he could see the rage in my eyes, but his voice was as calm as a mountain lake in the fall. I noticed that the volume of those invisible mining picks digging their way to the underworld was significantly less in that moment. They must have been far, far away.

The Duke murmured, “The deal will be struck, no matter what happens today. Koroth will march upon the world, and Royal Moffit will be the first Sacrifice made in his glory. Dead or alive, I will become the General of his armies. So it is written.”

I nodded, and then uttered the brief incantation that started all of this.

The Duke seemed somewhat surprised to be struck by my Force Bolt. His confusion was so profound that he didn’t make a sound, even when he plummeted into the pit of his own making. He was so distant when he died that I couldn’t hear whether or not he screamed when he smashed into the stone, and dozens of invisible pickaxes decimated his broken body.

“Guess me sees you in Hell.” I muttered, gutturally.

Ames called out, “Sorch, let’s go!” The feline was standing next to the passage that we used to enter the cavern, just at the edge of where the Light spell gave up and allowed the shadow to win. I knew that deep down, the were-cat must have figured out that there was no escape from this. It was pure instinct that drove them to run somewhere, anywhere.

I shook my head, then poked my own chest with a calloused green thumb. “Sorch Stonebender.”

I walked over to where the rubble of the cave in gave way to the smooth stone wall separating us from the Arcane Syphons. Even in my current state, I knew what had to be done. I reached into my component pouch and took out the little block of clay. My finger poked a hole right through it, and then I laid my palm against the wall and murmured the incantation.

As I said before, I’m not a religious man. I don’t worship these gods and goddesses, and I don’t play their games. However... when the goddess of magic gives you a hint, I think it’s in one’s best interest to take it. Besides. It was my name.

My Stone Shape spell silently melted a hole in the wall. I reached through and stretched out my hand until my fingertips touched that warm, thrumming metal.

Even with my mind mostly unravelled, I knew what to tell them.

Stop.

The Syphons ceased their digging.

Go up.

In the chamber beyond, thousands of phantom hands appeared. Some took up phantom picks and started to dig a passage to the surface. Others picked up the Arcane Syphons and started to carry them away, transporting them up the freshly dug tunnel. They wouldn't stop until they reached the surface and felt the setting sun bathe them in the day's dying light. I felt the last of the artifacts slowly drift away, until my fingers were touching nothing at all.

"Stop him!"

I turned towards those voices. Clerics and soldiers of Korothe had abandoned the battle above to investigate the earthquake and subsequent cave in. At this point, my brain was soft, like a preserved peach. The drain had taken me all the way back to when I first discovered the enhancement. It didn't matter, I only had a single spell left, and it wouldn't help against a dozen enraged cultists.

Then I saw that pair of feline eyes, shining in the darkness. They were angry, desperate, looking for some way to kill all of these interlopers and rescue me. Ames was behind the cultists, in the shadows of fallen rubble, calculating how many they would be able to take out. It was suicide of course.

That's when I realized what I had to do with my last spell. I faced the approaching force and vocalized my final incantation. They laughed when nothing seemed to happen, and continued to stalk forward.

Only they weren't my target.

As the final vestiges of my enhanced intelligence drained away, I watched those eyes in the shadows. Confusion as the Silence spell enveloped Ames. Then outrage as the were-cat realized that I took away any offensive move they were contemplating... the sphere of silence would have been a dead giveaway that something was amiss. Finally, a profound sadness. Forced to make the only smart move, I watched those eyes tear up, and then vanish into the darkness.

The cultists must have been wondering why this stupid orc was just standing there, smiling, staring off into the distance. The blackjack that slammed into the back of my neck wiped the smile from my face. It was a race to see if the darkness would hit me first, or the stone floor that was rushing up to meet me. It was the darkness.

Chapter 18

Me not dead yet. Soon.

Dunno how many moons gone. Bad men put orc in small room with bars. Say god need to know what in orc head. Me say head not so good. They beats me when say that.

They ask about dream. I tell them about cold place. About snow. About warm fur keep me living. They say they not care. Cut me 'til bones show and orc scream. Think me dead, but no. Mad god heal me so they can do again next day.

They ask about nightmare. Don't know nightmare. Every night, dream of snow, of cold place, of warm fur. Dream of people who need me.

Hear them talk about getting me smart. Me smart orc, how get smarter than dis? Then they say no, they break me faster dumb. Me say me feel broken already. Not smart thing to say. Break me more. One man get so angry, he break bar door. They move me to next bar door over.

Me do remember daydreams. Tells them sometimes daydream of bulls, and kitties, and men. And me happy, pretend dreams real. But know they not real. Village real. Dis place real. Don't remember how me get there to here. Me go home if they let me. They don't.

Less pain if me don't talk about daydreams. They hurt me less. But me also hurt less inside, if just forget. So me forget. Daydream less and less, until no more daydream. Is better that way.

After while, not sure why here. They asks stuff and things, but not understand. They make pain, not sure why. Hear one say healing not working so good. Soon not work at all. Maybe then, let me rest. Rest for good.

Today someone fix bar door mean man broke. Hear them come down stairs, many tools banging.

Me think about ways to sleep and not wake. Maybe take door tool and use dat. I wait and see who come and what dey bring.

Lock fixer close door behind dem. Don't go to broke bar door. Look at me instead.

Is a kitty. Wear pretty rock ring.

Kitty smile at me.

Dunno why... but me smile back.

End of Book 1

Thank you for reading the free version of *'Another Stupid Spell'*. Please consider **leaving a positive review on [Amazon](#) and [Goodreads](#)**. The more five star reviews that we get, the more people we can reach. And the more people we can reach, the more Panos books I'll be able to write.

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Bibliography

'Another Stupid Spell' - Book 1 of Another Stupid Trilogy

Sorch is an orc mage in a world where orcs are cursed with stupidity every time they cast a spell. While foraging for food one fateful night, our hero happens upon two human mages who are in big trouble. He saves their lives, and in return they give him an amulet that will make his life easier. Unbeknownst to the humans, their gift grants Sorch the power to break the cycle of intelligence drain and physical abuse. With the help of his friend and mentor, Shaman, Sorch becomes a real mage.

Sorch leaves his swamp and embarks on a series of incredibly exciting and dangerous adventures. During his travels he encounters horrible injury, magical treasures, love, snow, university admissions tests, a plot against the Kingdom, and then of course he saves the world. Or does he?

Get *'Another Stupid Spell'* for FREE at: <https://billricardi.com/>

'Another Stupid Demon' - Book 2 of Another Stupid Trilogy

Sorch is a former orc mage, and the prisoner of a demon worshiping cult that is trying to steal his nightmares. One jailbreak later and Sorch is unleashed upon the world once again.

But this time, he's not so sure that he wants to go back to a life of magic and adventure. Being the smartest orc on all of Panos wasn't all fun and games.

With the help of a new friend, Sorch rediscovers his purpose in life. He embarks on a quest to save his friends, who were trapped on another plane of existence. During his travels he encounters more horrible injury, more magical treasures, casual love, university midterms, a

plot against Panos, and then of course he saves the world. Or does he?

[Get 'Another Stupid Demon' on Amazon](#)

'Another Stupid Apocalypse' - Book 3 of Another Stupid Trilogy

After destroying the possessed Voodoo Engine that threatened to enslave his tribe and start the next Great War, Sorch took some much needed time away from the peril of adventure. In the two years that followed, Sorch finished his arcane education and learned to be a real father to his recently discovered son, Benno. But the world wasn't done with Sorch and his family just yet. Drought, flooding, and deadly creatures driven up from the depths of the earth itself threatened to destroy cities and towns all over the world. It would take the two smartest orcs on Panos, and all of their brave friends, to discover the forces that threatened to tear the planet apart.

In a race against time, Sorch is forced to lead his family into unparalleled danger. During his travels he encounters even more horrible injury, even more magical treasures, yetis, the power of fatherhood, frightening school children, an ancient threat to all of Panos, and then of course he saves the world. Or does he?

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'A Princess of Last Resort' - Book 1 of The Blackstaff Siblings

16 years after Sorch saved Panos, a new threat arises, and the next generation of heroes must answer the call. After escaping an invasion force in the northern elflands, young Sarah and her half brother Granite find themselves far from home. Neither she nor her brother were prepared for the harsh elements, or for a mercenary army's dogged pursuit.

Now the clever young mage and her fiercely loyal brother not only have to survive, but they also need to find new allies that can help answer the questions that haunt them: Are their parents still alive? Why can nobody reach the elven royal family? Was the firestorm a natural event, or something far more sinister? Finally, who are these invaders, and what do they want with the Blackstaff siblings?

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'A Falconer's Guide to Dying' - Book 2 of The Blackstaff Siblings

Imprisoned by cultists who see him as their potential saviour, Granite must endure painful indignities and life threatening trials. But a dying falconer offers the young half orc a glimmer of hope in the form of Belinda, a magical gyrfalcon that can train and guide Granite as he tries to survive long enough to complete the quest for the Igneous Crown.

His sister Sarah, tormented by the decision to leave her brother behind, seeks answers to the riddles that tore her family apart. While trying to win back the trust and loyalty of her companions, she unearths clues that might lead to the salvation of the besieged northern elflands. Can the hunted Blackstaff siblings prevail, when it seems like the gods themselves are hellbent on their destruction?

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'Rhythm' - Book 1 of The Ihy Saga

'Rhythm' follows Lucas Andrews, known as 'Lucky' to his friends. Lucas is a young man who managed to become legally emancipated from his abusive parents. On paper he lives with the family of his deceased best friend, but in reality they can't afford to keep him. Instead, Lucas lives in an old station wagon parked in the Massachusetts woodlands. He endures constant bullying at school. He's able to muddle through the pain, work in a record store in order to earn food money, and quietly finish school as a straight B student.

On the morning of his 17th birthday, Lucky gets the offer of a lifetime. He's invited to become a Host if he willingly shares his body with Ihy's son, Izadore. After weighing all the pros and cons, Lucas accepts the god's offer and is merged with 'Izy'. This fateful decision puts Lucas on a dangerous path. Being a Host also means being hunted. Will Lucas and Izadore be able to hone the power of their new partnership in time? Or will they be overrun by forces who will do anything, including murder, in order to maintain the religious status-quo?

[Get 'Rhythm' on Amazon](#)

'Cadence' - Book 2 of The Ihy Saga

Lucas Andrews is on the run. As a Host, he willingly shares his body with the spirit of Izadore, one of Ihy's 72 sons and daughters from Ancient Egypt. Hunted by religious extremists, their music-inspired powers spiralling out of control, the pair flees to New York City in order to pursue the only course of action that they've been given: Find one of the legendary Muses of Apollo.

But the big city offers big problems and precious few solutions. Just as Lucas and Izadore start to find personal and financial success, they're plunged into metaphysical chaos and mortal danger. Will they be able to find the right help and training in time? Or will the nebulous Void or their dogged pursuers catch up to the pair and silence them forever?

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'The Seelie Recipe' - Book 1 of Our Seelie Earth

In the enchanted hills of rural New England, a reward awaits those who would take that one extra step and discover a world long forgotten about. Experience the wonders of the fae, and their subtle influence on Our Seelie Earth.

Olivia Mullins, a recent culinary school graduate from Vermont, risks everything she owns to buy a food truck and pursue her dream of creating lunchtime masterpieces using local ingredients. Her best customer is Red, a shy young artist with very particular tastes.

When their relationship starts to blossom outside of the world of food, Olivia discovers her new boyfriend's amazing secret. Can she handle the pressure of running her small business while exploring the mysteries of Red's fascinating, magical world?

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