

Emberhaven

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

Part 3

Vengeful War

Chapter 1

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

The church I had been married in was a simple one, dedicated to Kafziel, patron of dragons. Some dragons, anyway, the good ones. Simple wooden pews, the odd dragon sculpture lining the walls, stained glass windows letting in a multicolored riot of light. The priest, Isengorf, was fuming, not used to being interrupted in this way during a wedding. Oh, certainly there was the occasional suitor showing up out of the blue claiming to be the true love of so-and-so. An angry parent, finding out at the last second their child was marrying without their permission. Even the very occasional goblin attack, but that only happened the once and in a town much smaller than this one, without city walls to protect it. But never had he been interrupted during the ceremony by some stranger barging in and yelling at one of the guests. I knew this because he kept repeating it to us, while Snarly helped Senna lay down on a pew and catch her breath.

Snarly, one of the two companions that lived with us was getting the story from her. He was a young beastfolk boy, opossum type, left in our care by the lady dark elf Senna, that had just finished crashing my wedding. He had been living with us with some time, along with Hanz, the mechanical lifeform called a remnant. As in the ‘only remnant of the ancient civilization that existed before magic blossomed on Earth with the arrival of the Chaos Moon.’ They had announced they would cover the door, and were now standing near it, weapon arm raised, to make sure Senna wasn’t followed. My husband, the draig Malachite, still stood at my side by the priest Isengorf and the end of the row of pews.

“See, this is basically our life,” Malachite told him. “This sort of thing always happens. We can’t go out to a bar without running into some kinda cultist. We can’t take two steps out of town without running into a bug person, or a ruined cart, or a man eating plant. You just have to learn to roll with it.”

“I’m beginning to see why you wanted to get married the way you did,” he had to admit. “You’re not mad?”

“Oh I’m somewhat furious,” I admitted. I decided my wedding was over at this point, and the illusion magic creating my wedding gown shimmered and vanished, leaving me in my practical ‘adventurer’s clothes’ again. I made sure my long blue hair was in place, my natural color now after having my ‘curse’ removed by the being known as the Enlightenment. The boots that made me fireproof were on my feet, my normal leathers were in place, and the cloak Malachite had given to me was upon my shoulders. I was a bit scantily dressed for a church, what with wanting to show off the fact I actually had skin now and not jagged bits of crystal where skin should be. But I figured the Lord already knew what I looked like. If They didn’t, well, what sort of God could they be? “But it’s a vague sort of anger.” I indicated Snarly and Senna. “It’s not his fault... at least it better not be. Come along husband, let’s see what all the fuss is about. Father, thank you for performing the ceremony.”

“Of course.”

Malachite lost his suit, his usual clothes coming back as well as my illusion spell faded from him. “Yes dear.”

“The needth to reth,” Snarly told us as we got closer. “Thes dead on her feeth.”

“I suppose we have a spare room now,” I mused. “I can take what few possessions I own from there and she can use the bed. Let’s get home, before something else happens.”

“Thorry!”

“It’s fine, Snarly. Husband, you can carry her.”

“I’m supposed to be carrying *you* across thresholds, not some other woman!” he protested.

“Just how it’s playing out. Don’t worry about it. Plenty to be had after our second wedding.”

"I guess." He carefully picked her up and we headed out. I summoned my crystalline horse, Athame, and transferred the maintenance of the spell to the necklace, jumping on her back. Until we were home anything could happen, and I wasn't going to take any chances.

Once at home Snarly told us what he had gotten out of Senna, who was now currently resting in my old room. I had repaired her clothes and hit her with some healing magic just in case, but it seemed she was just exhausted more than anything. According to him, his family had been looking for him for some time now, after Senna and a half dragon named Salliven rescued him from some kind of attack. They had come upon the pair, captured them, and Salliven was now being held hostage while Senna had been sent to fetch him. She only knew about the Sleeping Lion, the inn we used to stay at until we bought the house we lived in now, so didn't know where to look.

We left a forwarding address with the guy that runs the place. Odd. Oh right, of course my wedding would have to be disrupted. We can't do things in the logical way like she asks around and just waits for us outside our house, to come back. No, that would be too easy.

"Tho we have to rescue Thalliven from theth beathfolk and thee if their claimth of being my family are true," Snarly finished.

"She's not going anywhere for a while," Hanz told us. "My scanner shows she is in mostly good health. Somewhat dehydrated. But quite exhausted. I estimate she will sleep until tomorrow."

And she couldn't have found us, say, two minutes later, oh Lord? Or even one minute later?

"So now what?" Malachite demanded to know.

"I'll ask my question magic if Salliven is safe for the moment, and if not we'll get a move on," I told him. "We can tell her direction and distance no problem. We can leave a note for Senna, or maybe we'll be back before she even gets up. If she's safe we'll wait around and get the full story. I don't want any misunderstandings on either side."

"Fine."

So I did a bit of magic, asking the universe a few questions about the situation. First up was "Is Salliven, known to Snarly, in immediate danger of dying?"

No

"Is Salliven, known to Snarly, bleeding currently?"

No

"Is Salliven, known to Snarly, restricted in movement?"

No

"Maybe she got away already?" I suggested. "Because she's not in danger, tied up, and she's not bleeding out anywhere. I don't think there's any real rush?"

"What of Snarly's family?" Hanz asked. "Are we really dealing with them?"

"I'll ask. Did Seena meet Snarly's real family?"

Yes

"Now how about that? They are. Or at least she's met them at some point in the past. I can narrow it down to 'in the last week' or something if you want?"

"They really are my family?" Snarly asked, surprised.

"So it seems."

"Not thure how I feel about that."

"Happy?"

"Depenth what they want me for. Thenna didn't get a chance to thay."

"I doubt it's blood sacrifice," Hanz told him. "They simply want you back, to know you are well and doing okay."

"Am I doing okay?"

"When was the last time you slept on the street, had to steal to eat, or looked upon something you couldn't afford to buy?"

"Not thence we got the houth."

"I rest my case."

So we puttered around, it was weird because nothing had changed, yet everything had. I was married to a guy that was slowly turning into a dragon. We had things to do, like see if that wind spirit (or whatever it was) could be trusted enough to be let out of where they were imprisoned. Not to mention track down other Gloom cultist sites and destroy them. But we were being sidetracked again, and we were prepared to take a day off after the wedding but not like this. We had to check on Senna, make sure she was okay, and guard her in case these opossums came around. I mean, if they really wanted Snarly back, wouldn't they have put a scout on her, to see where she went after they let her go? So we were all on edge.

But nothing happened, and Malachite and I finally went to bed. The next morning Snarly or Hanz had gotten Malachite breakfast (I didn't eat normally, being sustained by magic) and so I wafted the smell of bacon at him and that got him up almost faster than normal. We headed downstairs to see Senna back on her feet.

"Morning!" I greeted her. "How are you feeling?"

"A little better. Snarly says you're to thank for my clothes and wounds?"

"Think nothing of it. But if the guild asks, we never met, got it?"

"Understood."

"So what's the story?" Malachite asked her bluntly. "When are we leaving and where are we going and whose heads are we cracking open?"

"Right. So apparently the Burrowtail Clan, that's Snarly's family, suffered some kind of attack right after he was born. He was hidden to keep him safe, and that's when Salliven and I found him. They saw us from a distance taking him away, and thought we were kidnapping him. But we just wanted to keep a baby safe. They've been looking for us, and him, ever since. Caught up with us a few days ago, and captured us. Demanded we give their 'chosen one' back to them."

"Come on, not this again!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"First goblins and now this? Never mind, go on with your story."

She looked confused. "Of course. Apparently there was a prophesy about a lost son of the clan, coming back to save them in their hour of need. Which they believe is upon them, from what I gathered. They wouldn't give me any specifics, though. Salliven was held captive but I was let go, to come and get him. They are insistent you return to them, Snarly."

We all looked to him.

"I gueth we thould thee what ith all about, then?"

"It will be days to trek all the way back to their camp. I truly fear for Salliven, I hope she's being well treated."

Malachite just smirked at her. "Lady, you have no idea who you're talking to..."

"This is quite exhilarating!" Senna shouted over the wind to us. I had done the usual growth magic on Malachite who had grabbed us all up and headed to some woods Senna had pointed out on the map. She said the camp was there, we couldn't miss it, and the ground streamed past us. "I can't wait for Salliven to get her wings!"

"It's a great way to travel!" I agreed.

Hardly an hour after leaving she spotted the cleaning and told Malachite to set down, which he did some distance away. We didn't want to scare them too much, and had decided to walk into the camp. Senna and Snarly led the way, which turned out to be a good decision as three opossums appeared from behind trees, brandishing weapons at us. Looking them over their equipment seemed pretty old, but well maintained. They demanded to know what we were doing there.

Which I find hilarious. It's three of them against the five of us, one of us is a draig, and another a remnant. Anyone walking around without a weapon, such as myself, can be assumed to be a magic user, and Senna is back in mostly fighting shape after a good night's sleep and breakfast. Do these three really think they have a chance against us.

"Hold on, that's the dark elf," said the second one in line. "The one we sent to retrieve the young master."

"That means," said the third, looking at Snarly, "that this is the young master! Alarin, is that you?"

Snarly, no lie, looked behind him with all seriousness, and then back to them. "No?"

"Oh right, forgot to mention that," Senna kicked herself, with a snap of her fingers. "They kept calling you Alarin. We actually gave you the name Snarly."

Very inventive. Also, what's up with people's names? Malachite was called Morvin at his old home- Morvin? Morlith? Mortisha? Morvis! That's the one. Now Snarly isn't actually named Snarly? Am I still me? If I went home would people call me Heather or something? I am Orchid, right? Not Black Eyed Susan or Daisy?

"My name ith Alarin?"

"Indeed young master! Come, your parents are worried sick about your safety and well being. Let us go to them at once."

"I only care about Thalliven. Is thee okay?"

"Who?"

I tried not to sigh.

We hurried to the camp, which was a real camp, with tents and everything.

"Of course we don't live like this," the guards explained. "This is all temporary as we've been forced to flee from our home, the burrow. But now that young master Alarin has returned he will set things to right."

"Will he?" Malachite wondered, not believing it for a second. "That's nice for you. Let us know how that works out, Snarly. We'll just head back home, shall we?"

"Leth not be too hathy!" he protested.

"That's what I thought."

He was taken into the tent to have a reunion with his parents, while Senna demanded to see Salliven.

"Oh, she left two days ago," one of the guards explained.

"Hold on, you captured us, beat us up, tied us up, made me run all over creation terrified you would kill her at any moment to get Snarly back-"

"Who?"

"Alarin, or whatever you call him!"

"Ah, right. Yes?"

"And now you say she's just wandered off?"

"She didn't wander off. Look, our home the burrows has been taken over by a hag and a group of trolls that seem to follow her orders. They chased us off. It's up to the young master to drive her away."

"Just let me test my understanding for a second," Hanz spoke up. "I see approximately thirty beastfolk here, with various amounts of weapons and armor. But yet what you're planning on is a *single* beastfolk, who has yet to come of age mind you, to somehow liberate this burrow for you? To do what all the forces arrayed here cannot."

"It's been prophesized to happen, so it will happen."

"This specific event? How do you know the prophesy isn't about some other event in the future?"

"We just do."

"Huh," I remarked, looking at Malachite. "Now I know why Alveindros was so grumpy. This is what prophesy looks like when you're on the other end of it. They can say anything they want as long as it's 'prophesy' and we're expected to go along with it."

"I should write him an apology letter."

"I'll remind you when we get back to town."

"Thanks."

"So about Salliven," Senna circled us back around.

"Oh, yes, your friend. She insisted she was some sort of adventurer, and delt with this sort of thing all the time. She said she would take care of it. We tried to get her to believe the prophesy but she insisted."

"Sounds like her," Senna moaned. "And you just let her go?"

"Of course! She seemed very confident."

"But... you had us captive... to bring back- you know what? I give up." She threw her hands up in the air. "This whole situation stinks!"

Worse than Snarly, I had to admit.

It took probably a half hour for Snarly to come back out, trailed by his parents. By then we had seen much of the camp, a lot of it was makeshift, at best. Seemingly whatever they could grab during their retreat from the borrows they made use of, to the best of their ability. Word was spreading though and many seemed ready to break camp in anticipation of getting their home back in the next few hours. *Well, we're not sending him in there alone to fight a bunch of trolls so it looks like prophesy should have said that he and his friends would come along and save them.*

"Tho this is my mother, Thella," Snarly introduced us.

So Shella?

"And this is my father, Deever."

"Oh, are these the people that have been taking care of you?" Shella asked him. She turned to us. "Thank you so much!"

"Define taking care of..."

We all glared at him. As if to say "you could be back on the street tomorrow there little guy, show a bit of gratitude to the people that put a roof over your head." He totally missed the point.

"I have four thithers, and three brotherth. You can meet them later."

"Of course, of course! Anyway, as great as it is seeing you again, son," said Deever, "we need our home back. When can you leave?"

"They theem to think I'm all thath needed," Snarly explained. "They're obthethed with me figuring it out, rather than doing it themthelveth."

"Better get to it then," Malachite announced. "You want me to just drop you on the place or are you going to walk? We'll be here waiting your tale of adventure."

"You could come with me?"

“Oh, to properly record your heroic deeds? Of course! Perhaps we’ll fashion it into a ballad!”

“Now husband,” I cautioned, laying a hand on his arm. “It’s not his fault this all happened.”

“You’re married?” The two beastfolk seemed taken aback.

“Yes, in fact our wedding ceremony was interrupted by Senna here, raving about her friend being held hostage by a group of beastfolk. *This* group of beastfolk. You’re the leaders here? So I guess you’re ready to take the blame for my *wedding* being interrupted with *your nonsense*?” My voice may have risen at the end there, to a bit of a higher pitch than usual.

“Uh, well, get back to us when you can, son. Good luck!” Both scurried away, back into their very flammable looking tent.

“Fire?” Malecite wondered, looking excited.

“Only in my mind,” I muttered. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Chapter 2

“Who wishes to fight must first count the cost”

Of the thirty or so beastfolk in the encampment, one proved he had the mettle to join us, and served as our guide to the burrows. Borvic, one of Snarly’s cousins. We approached from the back, the burrows being a sort of hill that had, long ago in history, been pushed over a structure, thus protecting it. Only the front of the structure was now open, and had heavy metal doors securing it, according to him. But this worked out in our favor, as there really were no windows large enough to be used to scout so we didn’t have to be particularly sneaky in our approach. We just walked up to the back of the hill and looked around.

“This is your show,” I told Snarly. “I’m not going to suggest anything,” *like our usual approach from the astral or phasing*. “If you’re the chosen one, you decide what we do as you are fated to succeed.” *If it’s a real prophecy, that is. Which I suppose it could be.*

“Right,” Malachite agreed, leaning against a tree. “Or if you want to assault the place... there it is.” He gestured towards the hill.

“I gueth our firth thep is to thee if the hag hath used any magicth to thecure the plath. Can you tell?”

“I’ll give it a shot.” I vibrated my mana core, “listening” for any return echo in the manasphere that would indicate any sort of spell in the area. “There is something,” I informed him. “It’s covering a square shape inside this hill. Probably some sort of magic to secure the walls of the place? Odd, given the dirt is already doing that.” *Also what’s maintaining it? A permanent spell? Only a few of those. And the scale of it. Protection magic? Didn’t think hags were all that into sun based magic. Maybe it was there before? But then how did the hag get in? Very odd.*

“Okay. I’ll go look in the tiny window, Borvic thaid I thould the able to fit through the air hole.”

“That’s mostly what the windows are,” he agreed. “Air holes.”

“Have fun storming the castle!” Malachite told him. “Guess I’ll just sit down, have a little snooze.”

“Good luck,” I told him.

“I’ll cover you, my weapon is fairly long range,” Hanz added.

“Okay. Here we go.”

A moment later he was back. “Thereth four trollth in there. That I thaw. Tho how about thith plan? Thomeone goeth to the front. They cauthe a dithtraction. Meanwhile, uh...”

“Yeah, we can’t squeeze into the air holes,” Malachite reminded him. “We would all have to go to the front. You’re sneaking in? I guess if you wanted to shank the hag from behind... Is killing hags okay in the eyes of the Lord? I wonder about trolls now, too.”

“Hags are pretty much fair game,” I decided. “They gave up their mortal existence for power, making deals with demons for better magic. Rather than just, I don’t know, practice? Like normal people? But if we can take her to a church we probably should, to give her one chance to repent her evil ways and thus, save her own soul. Though I think maybe a demon gets their souls when they die, no matter what? Have to look that up. Trolls are intelligent, if you want to call it that, but do they have souls? They would eat me as soon as look at me, so if they do it’s probably worse. They choose to do what they do. They choose to follow this hag. That makes them evil too. I wouldn’t worry too much about them.”

“Neat! Fire it is!”

“Perhaps I could hit one or two before they could react?” Hanz asked. “How far away is the actual structure from the air hole?”

“I’m juth worried about that magic,” Snarly admitted. “Could be anything.”

"It really could," I agreed. *But at the same time, bouncing attacks back at the attacker? I mean yeah but also, I doubt it?*

"So let's all go to the front," Malachite suggested. "Just make me big, I'll sit on anything that comes out, and Hanz can shoot it."

"Let's make sure the front is actually clear?" I stalled, putting up a hand. "I don't get to do this spell that much now, as we're usually in astral." *Hint, hint.* I did a quick clairvoyance spell, targeting the front of the hill, or rather the "other side" as this could easily be the front. But not really. "Say, this friend of yours? Big? Blue skin? Tail? Horns? Kinda scaly? Big ax on a long pole? Looks beat up? Stop me if you've heard this one before..."

"He ran off," Malachite told me, deadpan.

"He did *what?*" I ended the spell, bringing my sight back to the location I was standing in. I looked around for our smallest member.

"See? There he goes. When you said big and blue." He pointed. Snarly was sprinting around the hill, about to round the corner.

"I'm beginning to doubt our choice of savior," Borvic mused.

"No, you think?" Malachite asked him. "He's a kid. What were his parents *thinking?*"

"That he was the chosen- did you hear that?"

There had been a dull thudding, and the ground shook a little. Snarly tore around the side of the hill and booked it back towards us. "She's been taken over or something," he told us, breathing heavily. "The attacked me the moment the laid eyeth on me. Didn't give chathe though."

"Just keeps getting better," Malachite announced. "Say, you don't think she was killed and made a zombie, do you?"

"Don't even joke about that!" I said, trying to stifle a giggle. "That's not nice."

"The moved pretty good," Snarly told us. "Not like thothe times Orchid made zombieth. I'll go try thomething elth." He ran back over to the hill and started climbing it again, up to the window.

"He's all over the place," Hanz worried. "Did he have coffee when we weren't looking? Did his parents offer him some? We need a real plan! Flailing around like Kermit isn't going to get us anywhere."

"Agreed. Wait who?"

"Kermit. A titan of the old world. Reporter. Educator. Producer. Director. Entertainer. Played the banjo. His hit song "rainbow connection" was the scourge of the airwaves for years."

"Uh huh."

"Yes, a true hero among frogs, Kermit."

"Frogs?"

"Snarly is back."

We set aside the mystery of Kermit to see what Snarly had to report. "They aren't getting angry, in fact they theemed amuthed at the otherth mithfortunth."

"They still aren't coming out?" Malachite asked, surprised.

"Doethn't theem like it."

"So what's next, fearless leader?"

"I don't know. You figure it out!" He went to go sulk behind a nearby tree.

"Thus commanded, let it be so," he said, standing up. "Usual routine then? Check the astral first. You can cancel out magic, right?"

"If I can see it," I agreed. "I would need to see the wall before I could put a suppression spell on it. And it would only be temporary, which is fine we just need to get inside."

"So if you made me big again I could just dig part of the hill away?"

"I guess."

"But the burrows!" protested Borvic. "You're supposed to be saving it!"

"No, your 'chosen one' who is currently sitting over there doing nothing is supposed to be saving it. Go talk to him. Meanwhile, I'm going to tear down this wall!"

Checking the astral revealed something I had never seen before. The walls were actually there with us. We didn't get too close to them, they sort of freaked me out to be honest, I had never seen anything like it. So we backed off and I simply made Malachite huge again, and he went to work.

"Make him stop!" whined Borvic, as Malachite dug a hole big enough to see through near the top of the hill.

"It's just dirt, dude, and some grass that grew on it. We can put it back when your *precious* burrows are safe. Honestly, why do you guys all live out in the wilderness like this anyway? It makes no- hello!" There was a clang, and his claw rebounded off the stone he had just revealed. "That's odd."

"What happened?" I called up to him.

He was scratching the stone, and looking at his claw. "I can't budge the stone. Figured I could smash a few bricks out, heck expected to do it by accident. It's no good."

"Well, let me try canceling the spell." *Something to make stone stronger? Is there a permanent spell to do that? Huh.* I headed up there, getting into a good position where I could see the wall. "Back off, I'm going to make you small again," I told Malachite. "I don't need the drag on my core this spell seems pretty strong."

"Okay!"

He backed off and I released his spell. Drawing in ambient mana I cast. "Let this spell be negated!" I felt I did fairly well, I was no archmage yet but I got by. The magical energies bounced off the stone. "Well, that's never happened before."

"It didn't work?" Malachite scrambled up next to me.

"No, it didn't," I replied crossly. "Are hags that powerful? Doesn't seem like they should be that powerful. Are hags *natural* magicians? Oh, shoot. I have no idea. If she used a spell to break her body's limit to the life force she can convert to mana for a single spell and another to drain her trolls of their life force and used all that to protect this structure? Yeah, I would never get in."

"So they're unassailable? We need that spell for our house!"

"Be pretty high grade. And I can't do the energy thing. No idea how long it would last for, in that case. Better to just nab those robot guards from that water treatment plant under the city. Have Hanz reprogram them or whatever they said, to guard the place."

"But think of the money!"

"That I would spend on the spell?"

"No, that we have in the house, you know, the 'vault.'"

"But if I can't reshape the stone, the vault would go away. We would need to get a real vault, which would just be sitting there and thus able to be picked up and moved."

"Oh yeah. Oh look, Snarly is back in action."

"Huh?"

We watched as Snarly climbed up the hill again, and threw open the grating covering the window. He jumped inside.

Malachite shook his head. "After the trap things that almost killed him, I kinda suspected he had a death wish. Now I know."

"He's beyond our help now. I just hope he remembers his invisibility symbol." *Hopefully the central part of his plan. You're welcome, by the way, for the thing that's going to let you sneak around in there.*

We headed back down.

"What happened? He just ran off!" Borvic told us.

"Beats me," I replied. "Honestly, he's always running off and getting into trouble. You would think he would learn. Not so much."

"You have to go help him!"

"I can't fit through that window," Malachite complained. "Maybe *you* can. I doubt even Orchid could. Go try it if you-"

"Dear, are you calling me fat? I don't even eat, I can't be fat." *Wait, we could do that! Shrink spell! Why didn't I think of that before? Huh.*

"You are sensuously slim, my love."

"That's better. Yeah, whatever he has in mind, it's all up to him at this point."

So we waited. It was probably shorter than it felt, but suddenly Salliven poked her head around the corner and Malachite jumped up, hand on his sword. She held up a hand.

"Can someone tell me what's going on?" she shouted. "What am I doing here?"

"Stay behind me, check her for magic."

"Right."

We advanced, covering her, but she made no sudden movements. I didn't feel any magic on her and relaxed. "Huh. That's weird. Well, good news, she's not an undead. I... have no idea what's going on. Why were you even out here? A spell to control people wouldn't last all that long."

"Not sure myself," she admitted. "I seem to recall Snarly though? Oh hey Senna!"

"He's inside," she said. "Hey yourself. Welcome back?"

"Thanks! It's all fuzzy, and I'm hungry."

"Eat later, rescue Snarly now!"

"Yeah sure. Huh." She looked Malachite up and down. "Check you out, big guy." She whistled.

"Whoa there, missy!" I told her, stepping between them. "This piece of dragon meat? It's mine. See the ring?" I held up my ring, and held up his hand as well. "Don't get any funny ideas."

She laughed. "Oh wow, the little kitty has claws. Nah, just wondered how far along you were."

I'm not pregnant. Wait am I pregnant? How would she know? I shouldn't be pregnant did I forget the spell one week? No, I couldn't have forgotten...

"Far enough, what are you talking about?" he asked.

Oh she was asking him. I get it. The dragon thing. Right.

"The dragon thing. Never mind, we can talk later. Hey, think I can get the doors open. Get into position." She turned and started banging on them.

Can one person evolving into a dragon really just recognize another? He doesn't look that different from when we first met. He's a draig, they all look like that.

"I see where Snarly gets it," he decided. "Get back around the corner."

"Right!" I headed back there, summoning my two companions as I went. I also took a deep breath, and put my emotions into the box. *Stupid pretty half dragon tall sexy looking my man over like that. Focus, Orchid. Tear his clothes off later and notch his ear or whatever- I guess she could go in the harem? But I expected at least a year of exclusivity. Is everyone going to be looking at him now that we're-*

"Getting it open!"

"Wait!" I shouted, getting ready to cast. "Make my husband grow!"

Trolls poured out of the door, quickly realizing they were, in fact, easily tricked. Hanz took one's arm off, while Borvik ran past and jumped into the fray. Salliven was trying to fight three trolls at once, the showoff, and I got the spell up and running on Malachite who grew to three times his usual size. "Let's do this!" he shouted.

Borvick got in a lucky hit, taking the head of a troll clean off, while Besom fluttered ahead and put a needle into the one behind that one. Didn't seem to phase him that much, he pressed on and smashed into Borvick, taking revenge for his buddy whose head was already starting to regrow. Besom got right in his face while I empowered my next spell, trying to distract him. It was enough, I prayed

my empowering was enough to cut the spell incantation short and whisked Borvick over to me. Trusting Boline to protect me I bent over his soon to be corpse if I didn't help soon, and used my minor healing magic to at least start to stabilize him. By the time I had healed the majority of the wound the fight was over, Hanz was shooting blasts at the various pieces of troll that were left, making sure they didn't regenerate.

Thought trolls would be a bit more of a challenge, even for them. Is Salliven just that good or what?

"I can't get past the doorframe, despite the door being open!" Salliven complained, pushing against nothing. "What's this all about?"

We all tried going inside, but none of us could.

"So it's not just a spell that enhances stone," I reasoned. "I'm not sure how we're getting inside. What spell is this?"

"Snarly! Get up here!" she called into the place. "Can sound even get in there?"

"No idea." *Maybe my two companions could, they're mindless?*

"Wait, I heard him. He's coming up," she reported.

It turned out, Snarly had "defeated" the hag by distracting her, locking her in her own cell, spilling a bunch of chemicals or potions or something on the floor, and then convincing her she was hearing voices. The fumes had essentially knocked her out, leaving her harmless.

"Until the effects wear off," Hanz reminded us. "I can give an approximation if I scan her. Unless she's faking it right now, to try and lower our guard and simply bring her out, where she will escape using magic."

"I can't say I can lock her down," I told them. "If she gathered energy for one big teleport spell, she could overwhelm my magic. Sorry, just how it goes."

"Bring her up here and I'll finish her off," Salliven told us. "You guys are pretty squeamish, huh?"

"Just concerned for our souls," Malachite told her. "No, we're bringing her to a church and letting them deal with her. Orchid can knock her out fully with her magic."

"That's true," I agreed. "I do have a knockout spell. Bring her up here, if you can, Snarly. As you seem to be the only one that can go in there."

"Okay."

Meanwhile Malachite was still big, so he fixed the dirt as best he could, and when she was in range I hit her in the head a few times with my knockout spell. She seemed pretty out of it already, so she wasn't faking it.

"Thee wath making a lot of potionth down there," Snarly admitted. "All broken now."

Could have blown yourself sky high. Again. Whatever, protected by prophesy I guess?

We headed back, it wasn't that far, and the camp gave a mighty cry over Alarin's victory.

"And it pretty much was his victory," I mused. "Funny how that worked out. All that flailing around finally did produce a result."

"Yeah, yeah," Malachite agreed. "He took an awful risk though."

"Yup."

"Quick don't talk about him he's coming this way!"

"Very funny," he said. "My parenth want me to go back to the burrowth. Thay itth my home. But I want to thay with you all."

"Don't be so quick to throw away your parents," I cautioned. "Look at us. My parents don't want me around. Hanz has no parents. Malachite needs to reconcile with his, preferably before our 'big' wedding. Yours actually want you around. Don't take that lightly."

"Yeah, have they smelled you? Take them up on their offer before they change their minds."

“Do you not want me back?” he asked.

“The choice is yours,” I told him. “You have to do what you think best gives you a bright future. Fighting the Gloom with us, or returning with your parents to the burrow. I’m sure either door is open to you, no matter which of us you pick. They won’t deny you visits, and neither will we.”

“I’ll stay with them for a bit, and Thalliven and Thenna, now that I know they’re okay.”

“Guess that’s settled then,” I told him. “I can check in with you every few days. Leave a note out or something I can see with magic when you want to come back. I’ll check the area with my clairvoyance spell once a day, maybe in the evenings? We’ll come pick you up. Do *not* tell them where we live. You might come to trust them but I don’t need them knocking on my door after you come back wondering when you’ll visit next.”

“I know.”

I just stared at him.

“I’ll let you know when I want to come back.”

“Okay. See you later.”

Chapter 3

“To know your Enemy, you must become your Enemy.”

The next day we decided it was finally time to look into that weird voice we had heard weeks ago, that wanted to escape their prison. I was concerned with the answers I had gotten from my question magic at the time, that it wanted to harm others outside the cave, and the fact the first chance it got it straight up murdered all the animal life in the cave we had gone out of our way to avoid harming. With low expectations Hanz agreed to accompany me to the library while Malachite was taking care of some other business. As with the Enlightenment it was hardly likely we would find any book old enough to describe the place we had heard the voice much less tell us what it was likely to be. But we had to start somewhere.

“Excuse me,” a pitiful voice cried out to us on the street. We both looked over and found a young human boy running up to us. “Can you help me?”

“What seems to be the trouble, human child?” Hanz asked him.

“My cat, sir. It’s run into that abandoned building and I’m afraid to go in after him.”

We both looked at where he was pointing.

“A keen survival instinct you posses there, young master,” Hanz agreed. “It does indeed look about to fall down at any moment. Allow us, capable adventurers that we are, to tread there in your stead.”

“Oh thank you sir! Thank you lady!”

I was of course disguised as my owl form, wearing a somewhat scanty red wrap secured with a wide golden belt. Long feathers hung down from my arms, and my necklace with the stone fins was clearly visible around my neck. “Good place for an ambush,” I remarked, looking the dilapidated building over.

“Do you think the Gloom is recruiting children now?” Hanz asked.

“I don’t think we can be too careful.”

“I shall watch my step and scan for lifeforms. Those precious little life forms.”

“Uh huh.”

We walked in, the floorboards creaking under us. *Thank the Lord I am not made of stone anymore. Now, if I was a cat where would I be? Down by the docks, trying to get fisherman to give me fish by looking cute. Actually could I be a catgirl and get a discount on some fish? Malachite likes fish, I could cook some up for him today. If only the cat hated my guts, I could use my detect enemies spell to find it. I don’t think augment skill is going to help, there’s no skill of ‘cat finding.’ Is there? No... Maybe if I shrank myself, and then used the disguise spell to become a mouse. A mousegirl! That’s a new form I could take. With cute little round ears, and a cute little nose, and a cute little- What was that?*

We had separated, Hanz going one way and I going another. There was a horrendous creaking noise and I looked over in their direction. Our eyes met, one of their feet was stuck in a floorboard, and I realized that just because I wasn’t made of stone anymore, it didn’t mean Hanz wasn’t made of metal. With a horrendous crack the room above Hanz gave way, showering them with plaster, rock, bits of wood, and a lot of dust. There was a yowling, and the cat we were after (or some other cat they were here to meet and have kitty fun times with?) came tumbling down. It hissed at me, and bolted.

“No?” I said to the air, raising my arms. “Telekinesis.” As chasing a cat around a room when one has magic is a very, very silly thing to do. I knew a guy named Ron that had done that once, he was a very silly man. The cat was lifted off his feet and howled as it clearly didn’t know what was going on. “Sorry little puss, I can’t explain it. I don’t have a spell to talk to animals. By the way you okay under there, Hanz?” I yelled. “You dead?”

“Peachy!” they yelled back. “Get me out of here!”

“One second!” I headed back out and handed the cat over.

"Thanks lady!" The boy took off. My big owl eyes blinked in his direction.

What were you expecting, a bag of gold? An XP boost? Level up? Shiny rock that turned out to be a powerful magical item? Get real. Let's go free Hanz. City really should do something about these old buildings though, that was dangerous! What if it had been me under there? Okay maybe I could have phased in time?

Some time later I helped Hanz dig himself out, cleaned us both off, and we finally made it to the library our good deed for the day done. Paying the fee and entering the building Hanz stood looking around.

"I must admit my usefulness to you may be limited," they told me. "I am unsure where to even start looking."

"That's because I haven't augmented you yet, silly! Let our skill be augmented!" I cast my augment skill spell on the both of us, quietly of course because it was a library.

"Ah," they said as the energies sparkled around us and vanished. "Of course. Quite obvious, isn't it? I will you bring you any materials I procure while browsing."

"I'll meet you over at that table." I picked one at random, pointing.

"Very well."

We researched for a bit, and as I expected it wasn't a wealth of information but at least a couple of coins worth. The voice could be another being like the Enlightenment, or coming from another plane entirely. The being itself could be a demon, there was one report of a sealing being done in the Copperneck region, to supposedly get rid of a demon that could "lay waste to an entire continent." *Figures, a being with that kind of power and they just use it to destroy. Why not, I don't know, something productive? You're a demon I get it, but you can only destroy something once.* On the plus side, the book noted a magical object, a scepter, that could be used to strengthen the barrier should it ever weaken. I leaned back in my chair, thinking. *The book actually lists a location and the passphrase to enter the chamber. So what are the odds it's still there? Also, using some random magical object on some random magical prison could be a bad idea. If it's not the same prison the magic could interact in strange ways, making things worse. Worse how? That's the best thing about magic, you never can tell!*

We copied out the directions to the place and the key phrase and left the library behind.

"What is our next move?" Hanz asked.

"Prayer," I answered at once. "I wish to pray for guidance. If this is a demon as the book suggests the Heavens should know about it. They can give me a clear 'don't you even dare, girlfriend' and that can be the end of it."

"I must say, I've been rubbing off on you."

"What, I'm not turning metallic now am I?" I checked my arm. "I only just got rid of the stone!"

"No, what I mean is- and you're laughing at me. Ha ha. Humor module engaged Ho Ho Ho!"

When we got home I went to our bedroom, that is mine and my husband's, and I knelt to pray. I had decided to pray to Eistibus, patron of divination. I figured *if releasing this thing is a bad idea, an angel that specializes in divination would be the best choice to look into it.* I sent a prayer into the world, and tried to open myself up to any response. I felt as though I did in fact get one, but frowned as it wasn't exactly what I had been hoping for. Basically that "it is not the Heaven's place to tell you what to do" and "you will face danger either way." I opened my eyes again and scowled. *I'm not asking you to tell me what to do. I'm asking if setting this voice creature free is a good idea. It's a yes or no question. I still have to make the choice.*

"Prayer is out," I announced to Hanz. "The answer was not helpful."

"I have not observed many times it was," they admitted. "But you keep on being faithful."

"I will, thank you."

"Of course."

With no further leads we headed out to the island the next day, the fresh air a welcome change as Snarly was still visiting his parents. Being squished only next to Hanz, who didn't smell like anything, was quite the change of pace. And speaking of a change of pace, it seemed a small army of lizard men was steaming out of the swamps and heading towards the city! Malachite had pointed it out to us, and banked, probably intending to head back to the city to warn them.

It wasn't that long ago we were defending against hobgoblins. Huh, wonder how those hobgoblins that Snarly helped out are doing? I mean I don't care that much... Now what?

Malachite was pointing again, and indeed there was something in the air heading straight for the lizard men. It seemed to be the dragon we had recently met, and we turned around yet again in time to see the dragon spraying ice all over the place and the lizardman army scattering. I would scatter too, when two dragon sized figures were flying around and trying to kill me. Still, I had to feel for them. Maybe they were just coming to do some shopping? We would never know. Did lizardmen like stone figurines? I needed to make sure my supplier had enough, when had I last delivered a load to him? I didn't want my revenue stream to dry up after all.

The dragon landed, and Malachite landed next to him. It was indeed Ax'rejj, who waited for us to come over him, as Malachite had already shrunk by that time.

"Hello there!" he called down to us. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"Well met!" Malachite bellowed up to him. "What brings you out this way?"

"I did promise to head into town and make sure everyone there knew I wasn't a threat to them. You did tell them I was coming didn't you?"

"Of course we told them you were coming!" He leaned over to Hanz. "We told them he was coming, right?"

"Yes, I did. He's expected."

"Oh good!"

"Great! We can go together if you have a moment. Oh, and I have something for- where's the little one?"

"Little one?" We all looked around.

"That tiny one!"

"Oh, Snarly!" Malachite realized. "Visiting his parents, that he recently was reunited with."

"I see. Well, it occurred to me I was a bit stingy with you last time, so I was bringing you a little extra to make up for it. Can you see he gets his share?" He tossed four clinking bags down to us. As it would have been incredibly rude for us to stand there and count any coinage right in front of the dragon we simply gathered them up and thanked him.

"Of course! Now, get big again and let's goooo!"

We stayed with Ax'rejj at the gate while Hanz went to go see the captain of the guard, who was brought out moments later to talk. Most of the guard was already mobilized, two huge figures flying around will do that, but as they had been forewarned and the dragon was being civil that would no doubt be all taken care of soon. We didn't stick around, after introductions were made we were more in the way than anything else, and once again headed out to perhaps finally make it to the island before it sank into the water for good.

After flying for a time and asking my question magic if we were still heading in the right direction we landed on a strip on land that seemed promising. Vine covered ruin? Check. Half submerged in the water? Check. Mystical energies permeating the whole place? Check. We had arrived. Malachite and Hanz took up positions on the sides of the door and I got out my two magical companions. Speaking the words, and feeling a little silly talking to a door, nevertheless it worked and

the stone slab started to grind downwards, slowly enough I felt it might never reach the bottom and need some help with my sculpt spell but no, it finally finished and we looked down the stairs into darkness.

“Probably too dark for your vision spell?” Malachite asked.

I nodded. “But we can still tell a few things.” I cast the spell to detect any hostile forces in the area and almost staggered back. “There’s a lot of them!”

“But how, they haven’t even met us yet!” Hanz protested, pulling out their plasma cutter ‘sword’ and lighting it up. “At least give us a chance.”

“The cult can’t be here,” Malachite almost prayed. “It just can’t be.”

“They got to the prison before us, and they’ve had plenty of time to get into position down there. The book was at a library, after all,” I reminded him.

He just growled.

“They must have been fairly bored, after all this time wondering what’s taken us so long,” Hanz remarked.

I snickered. “You can say that again. Hopefully the end of the world progresses slowly enough for us to keep up.”

We headed into the astral, as usual, and headed down the stairs. I figured I wouldn’t see very much and would once again have to rely on Malachite but there were glowing blue characters running along the edges of the walls when we got down the stairs. There was a chamber, Malachite said it was empty, at the far end seemed to be a door with more blue writing on it.

“Wait, not empty,” he corrected himself. “More of those slime things on the ceiling.”

“It’s a sealed chamber,” Hanz complained. “How did they get down here? They have to eat too.”

“Good question. They are still alive I see them quivering.”

“I’m the only one allowed to quiver around here!” Hanz joked, an obvious reference to their now outdated practice of carrying around a bow and arrow.

“What do you think, wife?”

“The symbols seem to be protective in nature?” I guessed. “This is I guess a magical vault. We could phase, but I’m afraid if they went through the trouble of making sure this avenue of attack was cut off, simply crossing the line will blow the whole place up.”

“It’s not the slimes I’m afraid of,” he admitted. “It’s the guardians on the other side of that door. It was ghosts last time, what is it going to be this time? And you said there were a lot of them.”

“That’s right. One step at a time then. I’ll phase us, we can just stay here. Reach around the corner and touch the light. If the place starts to shake and sink or whatever we can head up the stairs rather than have to cross the whole chamber.”

“You’re so smart. Let’s do it!”

“I can feel it!” he exclaimed. “The wall is here with us in the astral! I’ve never seen the like.”

“Me either,” I admitted. “But at least it wasn’t a trap. I wonder...” I looked the door over. “If it’s here too... Unlock!” I tried my spell of unlocking things, something I hadn’t used lately as Snarly was always there with his lockpicks. And running foolishly into danger. Strange lack of that today, it was fairly refreshing not to have him need recuing every two minutes. *Oh right the door.* Nothing happened. In fact, my magic couldn’t even ‘lock onto’ it, so it wasn’t quite as here as I had originally thought.

“Nothing for it,” I finally decided. “We’ll have to go back, get that door open, and see what’s beyond. Thankfully we have this nice little choke point right here. Whatever comes through the door can just be sliced to pieces or burned to a crisp.” I looked to my companions, who indicated they were ready for action.

Back in the real world I had my two invisible pets get in front of me and once again cast “unlock” on the door. It worked, this slab as well starting to descend. But the vibrations woke up the slimes, who dropped, and started wiggling around looking for prey.

We made short work of them, Besom proving my decision to switch her over to wind needle correct. The two of us needled them, while Malachite breathed fire and Hanz stabbed with their plasma cutter. Both got splashed with a bit of acid, weapons and armor both, but we had bigger problems. With the door open the occupants of the second room- a great number of floating jellyfish- were on their way towards us.

“Those aren’t ghosts,” I muttered, looking at the approaching hoard. “Just an unusual animal.”

“So what are we going to do about them?” Malachite asked.

“This.” I figured my stone sculpting spell would take too long, so I webbed up the door with my web making spell. “And then while they try to deal with that,” I held out my hands, “we’ll just walk through them. Hang on tight!” Both took my hands and I cast phase on us, just in time too because the webbing plan didn’t actually hold up to scrutiny. The one in the lead simply tore through it.

So much for that. Still, maybe they’ll float up the stairs now that they’re free and no they’re trying to attack us. As expected. Many tentacles flashed through the air, and us, in a vain attempt to grab and possibly eat us. “Maybe we can outrun them?”

“What happened to cutting down anything that came through the door?” Hanz asked.

“Anything that wished us harm and was a cultist, sure,” I agreed. “These things just want to eat. They’re basically floating plants. Leave them alone.”

“As you wish.”

We headed into the place, and *of course* the jellyfish things could easily keep up with us, seeming more and more desperate for a meal. Our prize was ahead, and I was wondering if Hanz could break off, be fine because they couldn’t eat them, and they could grab the scepter we saw at the back of the room. That was before the giant plant thing stuck to the side of the wall made a lunge for us, which I of course ignored. My two companions, however, for *some reason* decided not to trust in my magic and jerked away from the thing, breaking contact with me and becoming solid again. This got Hanz stuck in the plant, and the jellyfish things were all around.

“Really?” I said to them. “What were you thinking?”

“Uh, little help?” Malachite pleaded as the jellyfish all brought their arms up for another pass.

Chapter 4

“In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity”

I tried very, very hard not to facepalm at the recent actions of my valiant party. I had other things to be doing, after all. I was phased, but they were not. They were in danger, and if these jellyfish things thought that they could hurt my husband (and Hanz) they had another thing coming.

I mentally willed Besom to go get the scepter, as clearly we weren't getting near the thing any time soon. I had wanted to share this victory with my companions rather than just having my magical construct do all the work but, as they say, needs must. I positioned myself as best I could behind Malachite, but still able to reach Hanz, and dropped the phase. Icky smells assaulted me, this place was a real swamp, but I had to ignore that for now. I put a hand on both of them and cast phase again without delay, bringing them back to safety. *Thank goodness for that, I managed it. It's almost as if I had practiced magic for a hundred years.*

“You're fast,” Hanz remarked, realizing they weren't constricted by the plant anymore.

“When I need to be,” I agreed. “Ah, let's go.”

“But the scepter?” Malachite protested.

“Taken care of.” I gestured to the far end of the room where the thing was being wrenched out by a beak, not that anyone could tell that, as interacting with objects didn't break invisibility. There was another plant there, and Besom had to dodge as it flew away, somehow the plant thing knew it was there? But it got away, and the scepter seemed to simply fly across the room and up the stairs.

“Magic. Don't leave home without it,” Hanz intoned. “Let's-”

They didn't get any further as a black energy shot out of the pedestal the scepter had been wedged into, smashing into and killing all the jellies floating around. A voice echoed through the place.

“You have been misled, do not bring the scepter. No harm will come to you if you free me, but I cannot say the same if you approach with the scepter.”

The jellyfish things sizzled and burned, and the place was quiet.

“Uh, you heard that voice, right?” Malachite asked finally.

“I heard nothing,” Hanz decided. “Let's get out of here.”

“... Yeah.”

We were able to use the phrase again to seal the upper door, not that there was anything left to escape down there but we didn't want anyone walking into the plant things.

“So what was that?” Malachite demanded. “Is that thing *not* trapped then? But then why the vessels? It can reach all the way here? Why black beams and not wind energy? None of this makes sense!”

“I have to agree,” I decided. “Let me even see if this scepter thing is what we've been told it is. Let my skill be augmented!” I sat with the scepter a moment, trying to work out what I was feeling. It wasn't exactly a spell, which was the thing I was expecting. It was more like the scepter was a well of magical intent, made for a specific purpose. That purpose did seem to be strengthening the walls of a prison, so that much was at least consistent. But it wasn't how such a thing would be done today, if such a thing *could* even be done today. *Curse you, mage war! So much was lost, and it seems we have no drive to reclaim that knowledge.* “It seems legit,” I finally announced, my spell fading as the job was done. “It's not a spell, but it will do the job the book says.”

“Can we use it the opposite way?” Hanz asked. “Or more accurately, can others that come after us use it in a different way?”

“Suck protection in, rather than spew it out, thus dismantling the prison?”

“Your organic euphemisms repulse and disgust me, but yes, that was indeed my meaning.”

"I don't know, it's not like there's a magical valve on the thing that allows energy only one way. It's a container, they can be filled or emptied."

"And what happens once emptied? Do we get only one instance of strengthening before the energies are exhausted? What happens in another thousand years when some other fools, I mean hapless dolts, I mean brave adventurers such as ourselves stumble across the thing? Can they rekindle the fire, or must they take up the power of the dark soul?"

"Again I must defer. I don't know how much of this energy will be used up. It depends on how much is gone now."

"Logical. My query module is returning an EOF value. No more questions."

"I have a question," Malachite announced. "How do we learn more about it? Do we just walk in with the thing and it does the job? Or is there some ritual we need to enact? And what about the warning we just got? More bluster from something that doesn't want to be penned up or a legit warning?"

"That was more than one question," Hanz pointed out. "But as you are a messy organic and language means nothing- I'll allow it."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

"You raise a lot of good points," I admitted. "I hesitate to hand it over to the guild, same reason I kept the darkness and light stones. Ugh, really need to figure *them* out at some point too. Stupid stones."

"May I remind you that the guild came after all this?" Hanz reminded me while asking if they could remind me.

"Right. So they probably won't be much help anyway. We need an older organization. Something that was around during that time and may still have records of this. Or maybe a seer? Someone that can look at the history of the object?"

"You don't think that crazy lady from the circus could help, do you?" Malachite asked, horrified. "That one Snarly said was 'quite beautiful in her own way?'"

We shared a look.

"Nah!" we all decided.

"Okay," I decided. "I'll ask. Maybe something like, 'is there a person in town that can help us learn more about this scepter's past?'" I held it aloft as if expecting music to play.

"Sounds okay to me," Malachite agreed.

"Give me a minute..."

Yes

"Okay!" I exclaimed. "Now we just have to find this person..."

We headed back to town and I asked a few more questions to narrow our search. Hanz suggested that the church had existed since before the fall, especially if this was a true demon as the research had indicated, perhaps they would know? So I asked if the person that could help us determine the past of the scepter could be found within 500m of a church.

Yes

With that in mind we headed to the largest church around, the church of Michael, and the surprised priest we talked to admitted that, yes, an old and valued member of the Demongate Foundation was visiting town, and would we like to speak to him? We indeed did want to speak to him,

and were introduced to a very pale fellow, yellow eyes, in a blue cloak that introduced himself as “Martin Deville, at your service.”

We showed him the scepter, told the story, and asked his advice. Sadly he couldn’t just snap his fingers and solve our problem.

“The practice of sealing away powers was quite ‘in vogue’ back in the day,” he admitted. “It happened a lot more than I think anyone would care to admit to. That war between the mages, it was a game of one-upmanship on a level I really, really hope to never even get hint of again. You summon some sort of crazy power to unleash upon those you feel are your enemies, they get a kick out of doing it, and then whoops you have to try and put them away again. But the reason you called them is because of their power, and certainly they want to stick around.”

“We actually freed another such being,” Hanz admitted. “One of the good ones that just wanted to go home. We’re familiar.”

“Really? Good for you! Nice to see young people cleaning up their elder’s mistakes.”

Hanz and I shared a look and snickered a bit. This guy looked to be in his thirties or something. Oh, how little we knew, truly. Only the ignorant will call themselves wise.

“Say, don’t suppose you know anything about the Gloom?” Malachite asked while we were chortling into our metaphorical soup.

“Gloom? That does ring a faint bell for me,” he admitted. “Why do you ask...” he asked suspiciously.

“It seems to be making a resurgence in the area. We’re doing what we can to stop it, and ‘disrupt’ the local cultists in the area but it’s slow going.”

Disrupt- meaning kill.

He looked at us with a new level of appreciation. “You do get around, don’t you?”

“Just recently it spoke to us directly,” I added. “Said it’s ‘roots are now deep’ and it wanted us to ‘break ourselves upon it.’ Like that’s going to happen, but still.”

“Concerning! Well, not what I’m here for but any evil force from the past shouldn’t be taken lightly. I’ll see if I can come up with anything if you want to let me know where I can find you.”

“Ah, if only you could text us,” Hanz lamented sadly.

“Ha, those were the days, weren’t they?” Martin agreed with a laugh. “Still, we managed it once perhaps we will again.”

“Er...”

“Anyway, let’s get back on track for your *current* problem. I think I can at least do something for you. Do you mind?” He held out a hand for the thing, and I handed it over. “This may take some time. Ten minutes, unless I miss my guess. All supernatural power takes ten minutes, one of the Lord’s little jokes They played on us.”

A passing nun scowled at him. “The Lord does not *joke around!*” she admonished.

“Oh, you’d be surprised.”

She gave a “humph” and continued on her way.

With a smirk he closed his eyes and concentrated. Indeed it took ten minutes, but he finally spoke up again. “I see it being created. There’s magic. Great power! I see a figure holding it, and I see a cave, a great chamber, the sound echoes. The figure, I can’t see them, they’re powerful. Using the scepter, imprisoning the figure. Something else in that cave. A battle of wills, but the sealing is complete. The vision is not clear. Someone else takes up the scepter. Who used it is gone. It’s vague now but it’s being taken someplace safe and being sealed away.” He opened his eyes. “I don’t know if that helps but I do feel the scepter was made to seal away a great evil.”

The others looked to me. “No,” I finally decided. “You made it worse. Thanks for that, I guess?”

“How so?” Malachite wondered.

“One has to wonder what happened to the person doing the sealing. If the person that used it is simply gone from the scene they may have gotten swept up in the prison. Maybe it’s the voice of *that* being we’re hearing. *Maybe* it’s the voice of the being imprisoned. How can we say?”

“The two different types of energy,” Hanz agreed. “That could explain it?”

“You did make it worse,” Malachite agreed, throwing his hands up. “Why does it always get worse?”

“Just another little joke,” Martin sighed. “With this information I would suggest simply doing nothing. You have a fifty / fifty chance of freeing an innocent as freeing a great evil. The one that did the sealing must have known it was a possibility, and if it were me, I would rather stay sealed if the evil I gave my existence to entrap also stayed that way. Would you not say the same?”

But they shouldn’t be made to suffer endlessly. No, there must be another avenue. Though we all had to reluctantly admit that was probably the case.

“Wish I could be more help,” he said, handing the thing back to me. “Toss it back where it came from and get on with your lives.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I told him. “We’ll see how it plays out from here.”

We gave him our address in case he came up with anything interesting about the Gloom we could use, and we headed back home. Plopping the thing on the table we sat around it, thinking.

“Okay, how about this?” I asked, perking up. “Is the voice we heard in the echo chamber the voice of the being that held this scepter during the sealing?” I cast my spell.

Yes

“Ah ah!”

“No ah hah,” Hanz countered. “What if the ceremony was to take this force into himself, and then seal himself? That’s why he vanished, and had someone there to pick up and hide the scepter again. They’ve just separated after so long a time but are still in the prison. I saw that anime- it’s called Slayers. Rezo, a priest, as I recall was in a similar situation. Didn’t know a demon was sealed in his eyes, making him blind. Odd, that he didn’t know, actually. He tried to cure his blindness and let the demon out.”

“Now who’s making it worse?” I teased them.

“So we’re not taking that guy’s advice?” Malachite asked.

“I’m just worried that the walls have started to come down,” I told him. “If they can be battered down from either side, whatever is imprisoned there now has all the time in the world to do so. And they clearly have the power to do so, all that killing each one did and at a fair distance. Those beams or blasts could be turned against walls easily enough. In fact may be even as we sit here.”

“Yeah, fair.”

“We were in a hurry, let me try this too...” I cast again, this time my clairvoyance spell and looked around the temple. Place was pretty dark, but there were enough small holes in the walls and ceiling to let in some light. I looked at the pedestal, and the walls, but no writing jumped out at me. “Nothing.”

“Like Martin was saying a force of good would not mind the force of evil being better contained,” Hanz decided. “Strengthening is the correct moral choice. Yes, a good man may be lost and that’s a tragedy but even a 10% chance we let out an evil is unacceptable.”

But if the good man and the evil man are separate now, and the good man is being abused by the evil one in the prison, doesn’t that change things? Aren’t we morally obligated to free the good man from his suffering?

“There is another guy we know who is that old,” Malachite mused. “Grandpa. We could go ask him.”

"No harm in that," I agreed. "Just don't wear your ring. Chances are he doesn't notice such a small detail but..."

"Oh yeah, we're married!" He had a goofy grin on his face.

"That we are, my love."

So the next day we flew out to go visit the dragon Alveindros, and Malachite introduced me to him as his fiancé. The great dragon didn't seem to have any problem with this, nice to know he wasn't a racist. *Of course with shape-shift magic in the world I or he could be any race we wanted, at least for a time. So really how can racism exist in the world at all?* But as to our scepter problem he also said we should just stay away from it. He didn't recognize the scepter or the location, so that was a dead end. We said once the Gloom was taken care of we would set a date for the wedding, and he said he would look forward to it. So that hurdle was cleared at least. We flew back and decided to try one last thing before making up our minds.

"I don't know about this," I protested, as Malachite dragged me to Solara. I was disguised as a cute puppy person, floppy ears and everything. "Think about the nexus poem. Yes it got that part right, but what was the choice I was supposed to make? Cure or merge? What merge? Nothing like that was offered. Three points in time but we only visited two sites in the past? There was a lot it got wrong or that we still don't understand even after the fact. This magic isn't going to improve our chances!"

"It got your 'curse' cured, didn't it?"

"I can't argue with that, this just seems like it'll cause more confusion."

"Is that even possible?"

I paused and chuckled. "No I suppose you're right. And this huge sack of gold is enough, do you think?"

"The rate shouldn't have gone up right? It's standardized by the guild? This is what she charged me the last time."

"I'm just surprised you're willing to part with it."

"Don't remind me, I'm trying not to look at it. Or listen to that beautiful clinking. Or envision the way the light glints off the gold. On second thought maybe you're right and we should keep the-"

"You could distract yourself with the way my cute little tail wags." I pointed to it.

"Walking behind you now would just make me think of doggy style. And I don't mean a martial art style either..."

"You're impossible!" I exclaimed, shoving him. I gave him a sideways glance. "Not out of the question though, when we get back."

"Let's get this over with!" He picked up the pace.

"Wait up!"

We told the story to Solara and showed her the scepter, may as well we had shown it to half the people in the town by this point. She agreed to think about the best way to phase the question she would ask the magic, to get us the best result, and to come back in a few hours.

"However. Should we. Pass. The. Time?" Malachite pointedly looked at me.

"That's up to you," Solara told us, already deep in thought and not catching on, or at least pretending not to. "I'll go get to work."

"See you soon," I told her. "Thanks."

We were a bit more worn out when we returned, and her apprentice said she was still hard at work. We shared a look, that wasn't a good sign? It took another hour but she finally emerged from the back, a piece of paper in her hand. "I think it's a fair reply," she admitted, setting it down so we could both look at it. "See what you think."

*Two powers bound in endless strife,
A voice of hope, a force of life.
Yet in the dark, another waits,
A hunger vast, to claim the fates.*

*The scepter shines, but heed its light,
For what it wields is not so right.
To bring it near invites the storm,
A darker force will take its form.*

*One prison holds both light and shade,
But shatter it, and choices fade.
If Voice is lost, the dark will rise,
And feast upon its fallen cries.*

*To guard the light, beware the chains,
For tightening binds may twist the reins.
The path you choose may doom or save,
And free the one the shadows crave.*

“Hold on,” protested Malachite. “Is this saying by trying to reinforce the prison we accidentally break it?”

Chapter 5

“Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak”

We pondered the meaning of the riddle back at home that night, and decided the best course was in fact the original one; set about finding the objects serving as keys for the prison and release the voice. The spell seemed to indicate using the scepter would cause disaster, which Malachite said made a sick sort of sense.

“Think of physical chains,” he mused. “They’ve been around for some time now, right? So they’ve gotten rusted and weakened. Loose around the prisoner, as they’ve lost weight in the jail cell. Now we come along and try to force them tighter, right? They can’t take it, they snap. Perhaps the scepter was supposed to be used on a regular basis, to keep them in good condition but the guy supposed to be doing that either was lazy about it, died without telling anyone, or simply didn’t care.”

“I simply worry that without the balancing force of the ‘good’ voice, the ‘bad’ one will now have even more incentive to free themselves,” Hanz countered.

“That may be a problem for the next generation, or heck maybe even us, as it seems all three of us around this table will- hopefully- still be around in a few hundred years. We can check back in. Set a reminder or whatever,” I told them.

“I have done so, you’re right Orchid, we can follow up once a year or so to see if there are other solutions needed. Building some other sort of prison around the existing one. If it seems to need doing I’m sure we’ll get some warning, the walls or chains or magic has stood this long. You may be able to research the scepter in the meantime and apply those lessons safely.”

“Great. In the morning we’ll head off and see about finding these keys.”

We all nodded our heads. The plan was made!

“Hey guyth, whath been happening?” Snarly asked, seated at the table the next morning.

“Ah, welcome back,” Hanz greeted them. “I trust the visit with the family went well?”

“Very well, thank you. I thee the cithy is thill thanding, tho nothing too bad happened while I wath gone?”

“We’ve just been on the case of this stupid voice thing,” Malachite told him, getting out a hefty portion of bacon and starting the fire in the stove. “We visited my grandpa, a vampire looking dude, and paid for the rhyming magic that can predict the future.”

“To be clear,” I clarified, “his grandfather is still a dragon, the ‘vampire looking dude’ was another guy. The magic was done by Solara. So we went three place, not one place.”

“You’ve been buthy!”

“You can say that again. We found a scepter, but we’re not using it. Orchid has it locked up with the other valuables downstairs. We’re going after the keys, it seems trying to put the walls up again will just make things worse.”

“Tho leth go!”

“Breakfast first!”

Our destination was a section of forest the locals called “the decrepit wood” so we headed out to do the usual method of flying there. Dragons were now a more common sight around town, at least Ax’rejj was and he certainly counted. But we still felt it was best to exercise what discretion we could and not simply fly away from the house. As we walked we came to an area with a suspiciously large number of big rocks, thick trees, and oddly shaped depressions in the ground. Standing by the road was a single man, who perked up at our advance.

“Excuse me there, hello!” he greeted us.

"Oh boy, here it comes," Malachite grumbled. "We can't go ten feet out of town without getting embroiled in some wacky adventure. What does *this* guy want? Can't we just *go* somewhere?"

"The probability of encounters is suspiciously high for our group," Hanz agreed. "How odd."

"We can meet a new friend!" Snarly announced, running up to the man. "How goeth it for you thith fine day, thir?"

"Oh, not well, not well at all," he lamented, shaking his head. "Expenses are high, revenue is down, it's lucky for us- me- that you happened by."

"How can we help?"

"So embarrassed to even have to ask this, but could you spare some coin? A lot of coin- all of your coin actually. I have a large family to feed, here they are now!" He indicated the surrounding area and out from behind the rocks, trees, and holes poured a huge number of bandits. "What do you say?"

"All right, all right, this is getting absurd," I burst out, stalking over to the man. "You're really trying to rob us with like, what? Thirty guys?"

"That's a rough estimate, why?"

"What are you doing?" Malachite whispered to me.

"Just a second!" I told him. I spun to face the man again. "Are you telling me that the *thirty* of you; healthy, strapping men such as yourselves cannot find *anything* to do with your lives other than sit around waiting for the odd passerby to rob? You're a whole company! Hire yourself out to merchant trains as guards. See the world! I see you have weapons, your expenses would be minimal. Offer your services to help dig out the old water treatment plant we discovered a few weeks ago. It has to be done, it's not dangerous work- I mean there might be some old remnants you would have to deal with."

"We need to take care of them sometime, if the city hasn't already," Hanz agreed.

"Er..." said the man.

"Renovate old houses! Scour the landscape for those stupid Gloom cultists. They always have a lot of treasure in their lairs. You would be doing the whole world a favor, getting rid of them, and be rewarded at the same time."

"Actually-" Snarly started to say, raising a claw.

"Not *now* Snarly," I hissed. *I know we've gotten Jack all from those people, but now is not the time.* "The point is a group of buff looking men such as yourselves is imperiling your very souls over a few coins, risking your lives, and it's totally unnecessary. You could easily find work in town for a group so large, even if you felt you don't have that many 'civilized skills' making short work of virtually any task. Hire yourselves out for big jobs if nothing is posted, someone could make use of so many. Pick a whole field full of crops in a day, I don't know. Yet here you are! It's infuriating! Just what do you think you're doing?"

The man looked a little out of sorts.

"They aren't *that* buff," Malachite remarked, looking around, as the men forming a circle around us all had confused looks on their faces. Clearly this was not what they were expecting. He was flexing a little, and a few did look concerned. "Yeah, you see that?" he whispered to no one in particular. "That's the real deal, you know?"

"Look, can we return to the original premise here?" he tried to salvage the situation. "We want your money. You're going to give it to us."

"By the Allfather, you people are so stupid. Fine, you want to die? Die then. Malachite, you know what to do. We'll be over here when you're finished. Try not to splatter the blood too much, like last time?" I spun on my heel and walked away from the man as he grinned and put a hand on his sword. "Come on Snarly, you can watch over here with me, don't get in his way."

The men laughed. "What? Just him?" the man asked. "Against all of us?"

"It's one of the *biggest* reasons you're so stupid!" I called to him, gathering ambient magic into my core. *I have a 50/50 shot at getting this off without the incantation. Please, watch over us Allfather, that these men can see the errors of their ways and turn to a more productive line of work after this*

demonstration. If it fails they'll react and this could go quite wrong. "Any person walking down this road could be an accomplished mage, able to do *this!*" When I said "this" I released the spell, cast on Malachite of course. With the extra mana from the local environment and my desire to not hold back, he grew to immense proportions, far larger than I usually made him to fly us places. In fact he would dwarf a fully grown dragon by the look of him, making me think maybe I could have held back a *little?* He roared and dropped to all fours, shaking the ground and creating a shockwave that knocked several of the men over. "That's my husband by the way!" I shouted, as the men scattered in fear. "Where are you going? I thought you wanted our money? No? Not so confident now, are we? Have we learned our lesson? Good day, sir!"

He roared again, spewing fire everywhere and the men fled for their lives screaming like little babies. "Honestly," I said to Hanz, "a mage such as myself might know any number of spells that could simply kill even that number of men in an instant. *I don't* because I feel violence should be a last resort but I *could* and isn't that the point? Anyone could, they don't have to look like a mage their next mark may be their last one! Oh to be clear my family's books didn't have that many damaging elemental spells as we focused more on utility and what are you-" I looked down to see Snarly had seemingly passed out from fright, as Malachite was enjoying his new stature and forcing the men to run faster lest they be devoured or whatever in their minds was going to happen if they got caught. Hanz it seemed had watched him fall over, and was now eyeing him.

"Oh dear," I muttered. "What do you think happened there? He wasn't hit by a stray arrow or something was he?"

"I shall attend to him," Hanz told me. "My bio-scanner will be able to tell me if he is suffering from any kind of stroke due to stress."

"Very well. Come on back dear, oh bother he can't hear me being that big..." *At least he's having some fun.* The ground was shaking due to his every step, and whatever he was saying was lost as simply a deep growl but it was effective, you had to admit that. *I do good work, we make a good team.*

We spotted a likely site from the air and circled around, landing some ways away to plan our next move.

"Let me see what I can see," I told the group, gathering mana. "Perhaps our earlier use of violence can be the only use today?"

"I'll check it out too," Snarly announced, getting a rope out of his pack. "The the treeth look climbable."

"Wait, Orchid can make you invisible," Malachite hissed at him, but he was already up the tree. "He didn't need to risk it."

"Perhaps he feels guilty at not being here during our earlier attempts to solve the mystery and wishes to make up for it?" Hanz wondered.

"Maybe."

I cast the spell a few times, getting a sense of the place both inside and out, and honestly it was a dump in the swamp. There may have been a town here at one time but the wilderness had reclaimed it, leaving only the largest building intact. The one taken over by reptile people just here living their best lives. I saw a number of large snakes, some crazy looking plants, and the place needed a good cleaning. *A woman's touch, that's what this place lacks. Cleaning implies leaving some part of the structure standing. This place needs to burn down, fall over, and sink into the swamp. Then build something better that stays up.* When Snarly returned we compared notes and decided on a course of action.

"Let's learn from our past mistakes," I offered. "We could have disguised ourselves as cultists a time or two, at least to get closer to a place and check it out. Especially that last place with the dogs where I couldn't use my magic. These people won't be expecting a trick like that, so it could work."

“What are you thinking?” Malachite asked. “Not disguising yourself I hope?”

I shook my head. “I would be concentrating on a bit of magic, best if I just stayed here and did that. Trying to come up with a story on the fly in that situation? No, I was thinking Snarly. He’s had success in the past,” *somehow?* “just convincing people of things. I’ll disguise him as one of these lizard people and he can at least get close, maybe take a look around the place and see if the vision of this object was even true. He can offer my magic or something in exchange, see what these people need. If we’re even in the right place, I mean. Yes, they are the same kind of folks that Ax’rejj scared off from attacking the town but maybe they just wanted to trade. He didn’t land and ask them what they wanted. We can try the gentle approach here *first.*” *For once,* I didn’t say.

“Are you willing?” Hanz asked.

“Ready and waiting!” he agreed.

We regarded him. “Well, it’s his hide on the line,” Malachite decided. “See what you can do, Snarls.”

So I put both the spell of disguise and communication on Snarly, making sure he would be understood perfectly and he marched boldly forward through the trees towards the place. I couldn’t change his size very much, maintaining three spells would tax me a bit too much so I settled on him simply being a young lizard folk. We followed after a few minutes, then Hanz went invisible and cautioned us to wait there. “We’re getting a bit close. We don’t want to give the game away now. I’ll keep an eye on the place and start blasting if something goes wrong. You’re sure to hear the commotion,” they said, “that’s the time to come running.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I replied. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

“Well this is boring,” Malachite complained after a moment, leaning against a tree. “Are you sure we can’t just go rough them up?”

“You just had your fun,” I reminded him. “Let them live their lives out here. At least they’re not trying to rob us...” *at the moment. How do they earn a living anyway? Maybe they just hunt the swamp and are not concerned with money.*

“Oh yeah!” He got a goofy smile on his face. “It was fun being so big...”

We waited hours, at least it felt like that, suddenly Malachite sprang up and almost drew his sword. It was disguised Snarly, returning with “Just some junk I’m getting rid of,” he told us. “Throwing it into the swamp. Where it will never bother anyone again.” He handed us a clay pot, which I now recognized from the vision as though I had always known that’s what it was. “They said they could never get it open.” He dumped the rest of the garbage in his arms and watched it sink into the swamp.

“Let’s go then!” Malachite told him. “Where’s Hanz? You around here buddy?”

“No good,” he countered. “If I don’t return they’ll be suspicious. Let’s wait a bit longer.”

Maybe, but how would they catch us if we simply fly away?

“Ugh, fine, I guess you’re right.”

“I called for the magic until we’re safely away,” I agreed. “Unless I fall asleep out here, you should be safe. They don’t suspect anything?” *Maybe he’s enjoying himself being a new person? I won’t take that away from him.*

“Nope! Totally accepted me after I almost killed that one with the sword.”

“You did *what?*”

“Got to go!” He skipped back off towards the place.

He was supposed to negotiate for the pot, not go killing them. But he’s still fine? Their culture must be weird...

By the time he came back and Hanz appeared again it was getting dark, so we headed back to town. We didn't get far initially, as the voice was somehow back in our heads. Which was *deeply* concerning to me, was it watching us? How? It gave us another vision, this one about the second location, which appeared to be the armory we had visited recently to get the frost gland back.

"I'm sure they'll be overjoyed to see us," Malachite said sarcastically as the vision faded.

"Technically, two of us were disguised, and Snarly was acting as an agent," I reminded him. "We can do the opposite this time. I think something similar will work here, we already know they're reasonable dwarves. Let's get home, I'll have to put a few things together and we can head there tomorrow."

That night in bed with Malachite I was trying to find a position that didn't poke me with too many scales when I realized something. I concentrated, and my eyes flew open.

"Malachite, you've been holding out on me!" I chided, sitting up.

"Huh?" was his elegant response. "You want more?"

"No, not that! I need to be able to walk tomorrow! I didn't realize you were cultivating. Why do it behind my back? I would have been glad to help. Were you trying to save it as a surprise? Who did you go to? They didn't rip you off did they? Oh, I bet they did! But when did you even slip away to practice? Have I been inattentive as a wife? I have, haven't I? Oh you must think I'm a terrible partner!"

"What are you talking about?" he wondered, looking up at me. "Being married to you has been great."

"Your mana core, of course! You have one, just as we discussed. I'm so proud of you!"

"I didn't think I was?" He sat up, looking at me with confusion on his face. "I have a what now?"

"The-" That stopped me short. "You haven't been cultivating? Trying to draw mana into a core which you can use to do magic? You're not telling me it happened *spontaneously*?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"What those outside the craft call 'the spark of magic.' It's where the mana is stored in your soul, that becomes magic when you do spells. You clearly have a core now. You could do magic. You're really telling me you weren't trying to do it?"

"No, I wasn't. Is it dangerous?"

"Danger- no! You can choose to use it or not. With study you could become a scholar of magic such as myself. However, if you wanted to be the 'other' kind of mage we would have to find you a trainer. I have no idea how they unlock a person's potential for spellcasting but there must be one. It could be useful, having both types in the family. But it's up to you. Either way you could learn fabrication now, or imbuing. You would need a teacher, fabrication would be a good fit, you have the raw strength for it I never did. You could make your sword or armor better yourself. Sharper, more durable. That could come in handy."

"The other type- They're the ones you think blew up that city in the past? Naturals?"

"Must have been. Those spells, the energy manipulation ones, are probably regulated by the guild. I don't know if my family's books would have them. So there's that. Oh this is so exciting! I'm so happy for you, my love!" I hugged him.

"Uh, thanks! Still not sure how it happened though."

"Then simply accept it as a gift. We will have to speak more about what, if anything, you want to do with your new core. It does open up options for you. We'll have to celebrate too. Maybe once this whole prison thing is resolved." I flopped down again. "A spontaneous core. What a wonder." *I'm not going to wake up one day to find I share what is left of a bed with a man now twice as big as I? This dragon stuff is happening quickly. Well, worry about that when the time comes I guess.*

Chapter 6

“The greatest victory is that which requires no battle”

The next morning while Malachite and Snarly had their breakfast I got to work. Having seen the inside of the armory I was able to scry upon the location again, just to see the situation there. Sadly, the dwarves hadn't spontaneously decided to leave the place, giving us quick and easy access, but were also waking up to the morning's tasks.

“Pity,” I replied. “We'll have to negotiate with them after all. I don't see the pot anywhere either, I would have to do a bunch more spells but I think we can trust the vision. It brought us to the right place the first time after all.”

“Am I up again?” Snarly asked.

“Don't want to make you do everything,” I told him. “But you'll still be nearby, make no mistake. I'm thinking the three of us simply pose as... who we are, actually. I might disguise Malachite here if you think that's necessary.”

“You think a bunch of dwarves can tell one draig from another? We've met other green scaled draigs ourselves, they aren't going to know the difference.”

“You are fairly distinctive my love,” I gently chided him and flicking his nose. He had a lot of piercings, both in his nose and eyebrow, and his ears were gauged. All part of his “rough and tumble” persona back in his Dresh'gronnar days. We had been together so long I couldn't even imagine him without all that, and frankly with all the fights we had been in it was a miracle someone hadn't just grabbed, for example, his nose ring and simply torn it out to distract him. “But you would know best in this instance.”

“I sometimes know best?” he gasped, a hand to his chest. “Can I get that in writing?”

“Now, now! You know I rely upon you for certain things.” I suppressed a giggle. *Opening jars. Reaching things on the high shelf. I mean I can't do magic for every little thing now I can I?*

“What is the bulk of your plan?” Hanz asked, seeming eager to get me back on track.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, of course. We know he's an alchemist. Of sorts, anyway. The story is I'm a collector with a nose for antiquities, they'll appreciate the metaphor. I heard about a strange jar tied to some ancient legends and managed to track it down. Bringing it back I was simply admiring it on the table in a tavern when Snarly here noticed it and came over to me. Said he had seen a similar one during a visit to the nearby dwarven armory. I then hired him as a guide to take me there and see if his story was true. What a find, two ancient clay jars from the legend! We'll bring along a cartload of ingredients an alchemist such as... whatever his name was... might have a use for to barter with. I'll have my magic going of course, to better my chances at negotiating with him. I'm sure I can handle that much and be coherent. Malachite, you can serve in the role of... my husband. Hanz you can be a family friend and expert in old world technology I've worked with in the past in my delves of ancient ruins. Of course if it goes wrong and he tries to steal *my* jar, well, you can then reprise your role as my bodyguards and dissuade them of that idea.”

“Wait, this plan doesn't seem nearly complicated enough,” complained Malachite. “Making me your husband? That sounds so familiar. I could do that in my sleep.”

And you do like to sleep, I didn't say.

“I do estimate a high probability of success,” Hanz reported. “I am proud of this plan and am glad to be a part of it.”

“We can finish breakfast though, right?” Malachite asked. “We're not leaving right this second?”

“Finish eating,” I told him. “I want to look the jar over anyway...”

I did, finding there to be some sort of magic I wasn't familiar with on the inside. I asked my magic if taking the lid off the jar was a bad idea, but got back a surprising answer.

"You can't."

Huh. Well now I'm even more curious. Oh right, the lizard people! Snarly said they couldn't get it open either. That's why it was on the trash pile. I stared at the thing, eyes squinted as if simply willing it would make the thing give up its secrets.

"A pity x-ray machines are long gone," Hanz spoke up. "We could have looked inside using one of them."

"Look inside, you say?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "Yes, maybe that could be done..."

"How so?"

"I'm just thinking, I have a spell to make an object light up now, and in theory the whole object lights up. Not just the outside. Casting it on this jar would thus light up the outside *and* the inside."

"That does stand to reason, yes. Imagine such a spell cast on a solar panel. What a sight that would make!"

A what? "And then I have a spell to see a location I have knowledge about. The jar is just sitting there on the table. I cast the spell with the intent to look inside it. With the inside illuminated, and yes I would have to be careful not to blind myself as it's a small jar, I could maybe see the inside! What a great idea Hanz, thank you."

"Of course."

But in the end all I saw was a bright light, and dropped the spells with a sigh. *It was worth a shot. I'm sure they will open... at the end.*

We headed to the mage's quarter, me disguised as a draig for once. It wasn't a form I took often enough, being married to one, so I decided to rectify the lack starting today. I noticed a lot more dirty looks thrown in my direction and people moving away from me than I was used to. It was so obvious it was starting to bother me.

"Is it just me, or am I getting more dirty looks than usual?" I asked Malachite.

"Welcome to being a draig," he muttered. "Not so great is it? You don't have to keep this up if you don't want to."

"Wait, you really are discriminated against?" I gasped. *But why? Being scaly or something?* "I'm so sorry! When was the last time I wore a face like this? Did I just not notice? I really had no idea. I must have been blind... It just seems so obvious, now there's the two of us. I want to grab all these people by the collar and shake them until their stupidity falls out!"

He snorted. "It's a little worse now. We're clearly together, and I think in their minds is something like 'how dare that draig find some small bit of happiness in his life. And look at that hot wife he's got, what a looker. Jealousy, that's all it is.'"

I flushed. "I'm a hot wife? I did try my best with the spell, and you did suggest what makes a draig look good to another draig. But how would they know we're together?"

"Dear, we're holding hands?" He lifted his hand and there was mine, in his.

I startled. "Oh my goodness! I just automatically did that, I didn't even think about it. What a wonder." *Still, to think in this age something like a person's form would still cause a reaction like this. Like with the bandits just yesterday, try to look beyond the surface for once, people. This isn't what I usually look like. Anyone could really look like anything, it's their behavior that counts. Would I have still gotten the same looks as an elf? Or even something like a-*

"Brownie! Stole my money pouch!" Malachite suddenly shouted. "Stop that thief!" He let go of my hand and went tearing off through the crowd. I jerked back and looked around, Snarly and Hanz

also tore off after someone, leaving me standing there. I hadn't seen any brownie. And what was with people trying to take our money lately? Was there that much crime in the city? Not enough work? Something should be done... not more prisons I mean more outreach programs. The war was over, the area was recovering financially, it behooved everyone to get everyone working and earning an honest living. *That would be an interesting business. A better job board, like in the town square. Offering services to those that stop in looking for work, we sit down with them and explore their skill set and find them an actual career rather than just a single job. Meanwhile those that own businesses can come and post help wanted ads, so we can more easily match people up. Sure there are church run soup kitchens and the like to feed those down on their luck but that doesn't solve their problem, does it? Someone that has no other prospects needs a place to go where they won't be judged, simply helped to put their life back together. Why is there no such thing? The kingdom should run it, the added tax revenue getting an otherwise homeless person working would more than cover the expense in the long term.*

Malachite was walking back towards me with the others, slapping Snarly on the back and hefting his coin pouch. Was it bigger than it was before? I knew my way around a bulging sack at this point, it seemed more full than it was this morning but I could be seeing things.

"Snarly went down into the sewer to catch the guy," he told me. "Dove right down in there. What a guy!"

"Thucks it wath nothing guyth, happy to help. He dropped thith!" He held up the most flea bitten, stinking, tattered, torn, filthy excuse for a rag I had ever seen. "I'll wear it forever, it'th just my thize." He started wrapping it around his neck.

"At least let me clean it off with magic!" I insisted, trying not to gag as the smell coming from him somehow got worse. "It was just laying in the sewer, you said? It must be crawling with... everything!"

"Don't you dare," he cautioned, pulling back. "It's perfect juth the way it ith. I know where you thleep."

"Yeah, with this guy!" I reminded him, pointing a thumb at Malachite.

"He doesn't thare me."

Malachite made a low rumble in this throat as a sort of "oh I don't do I?" sort of noise and I saw a hint of teeth.

We loaded up our cart with supplies purchased with the "party funds" which had not yet been distributed now that I thought about it. That pirate treasure was a gift that just kept on giving it seemed. With Athame leading the cart out of town, and then us awkwardly riding it, giant Malachite flew us towards the armory. The place was pretty out of the way, making me wonder how they normally got their supplies and if I should have included some more mundane stuff like chickens. Too late now. I hooked Athame up again and headed towards the place, and this time there were some dwarves cooking something outside that perked up as we got near. Naturally I hadn't forgotten to put my augmentation spell on before this, so I was feeling good about the whole thing.

"Good day to you!" I called, waving. "Is this the home of the alchemist... oh drat what was his name?"

"Tharvaan," supplied Snarly.

"Ah yes, Tharvaan," I repeated.

"You mean Sarvaan?" one of the dwarves asked.

"That'th what I thaid!" Snarly insisted.

"My apologies, I meant no disrespect."

"Yeah, he's here," the dwarf went on. "What do you want him for?"

"It's come to my attention he may have a clay jar, the twin to this one." I held up the jar. "I'm a collector of curios and came to see if I could interest the alchemist in some supplies if he wished to part with it." I indicated the cart. "All of this is available for trade."

"Do I know you?" asked the other dwarf, looking at Malachite.

"I don't think we've met," he lied.

"I've been here before," Snarly told them. "Thnarly, at your thervice."

"No I definitely remember you. The draig though..."

"Please do not harass my husband," I primly told him with a sniff. "There are many green draig in the world, I'm sure we have never been here before."

"You actually married a- okay!" He stopped that line of thought as Malachite "casually" put a hand on their sword.

"I've been here before," Snarly repeated.

"I think we've established that," the dwarf agreed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome!"

He rolled his eyes. "I'll go see if he's free. You stay here and deal with... this." He gestured to us.

"Aw, why do I always have to watch the weirdo- I mean, eh heheheh."

"..."

"So... nice day isn't it?"

Sarvaan came outside to see what all this was about, and his eyes fell upon the clay jar. He perked up. "You do have one," he exclaimed. "I guess they aren't all that unique after all!"

"Still, having two would be a nicer look in my collection than the one," I told him. "Are you willing to make a trade?"

He rubbed his beard. "Tried all sorts of things to get it open in the past. More of a frustration to me at this point. All this looks genuine as well, how in the world did you get that cart up the mountain? No, no, never mind. Not my business. Come on in, seems we may have business."

"Thank you."

Thankfully the wagon fit through the armory doors and with a wave I dismissed Athame. "I do want the cart back though, that's not for sale. I use it all the time."

"That's fine. Please, come in! There's a table over here, we can sit down."

"Hey how about a drink?" one of the guard dwarves asked Malachite. "While they hash out their deal?"

"Sounds great to me!" he replied happily, totally neglecting his duties as a bodyguard. He followed the dwarf into the next room.

"Are you allowing this?" Hanz asked me, leaning over.

"What do you mean? I trust him. He's not my pet, he can bond with the dwarves here over a pint if he wants. It would be pretty boring for him, I'm sure there's nothing to fear here. We're all entering into this negotiation in good faith, are we not?" I eyed Sarvaan.

"Of course!" he agreed.

"You see?"

"What a fascinating relationship. I will be interested to see if it continues in this vein. Carry on."

We sat down and I pulled out the list of supplies I had brought while he told another dwarf to "go get that stupid jar I could never open. You know the one. It looks like that!"

Snarly sat down beside me, and I tried to scooch my chair over a little without him noticing. That cloak he was wearing- did it just move independently of him? Was something *living* in it? A rat? I wouldn't put it past him to adopt some kind of sewer rat and allow it to live in his new "cloak."

"Now, I have a few things here," I began, "that the mages in town said you might be interested in. First on the list is three vials of-"

"Now that's good stuff!" Malachite called from the other room. There was a cheer, and cries of "chug, chug, chug!"

I put my hand over my eyes for a moment. "As I was saying..."

Snarly was a surprising help, I had to hand it to him. Sarvaan seemed to be trying to get me to give up my jar to him, but we kept him on track and he shrewdly and correctly surmised we had no use for the supplies and finally agreed to 'take the whole lot off our hands' in exchange for the second jar. I agreed, helped him put everything away as Hanz watched over the two jars, and cast Athame again to haul the cart out.

"Wonderful people, dwarves," Malachite only slightly slurred as he joined us. "I've always said this. Haven't I always said this? So generous. With. The booze. And boy can they drink. Are there two of you now? I want to be home with both of you, right now!"

"Perhaps your trust is a bit misplaced?" Hanz inquired politely. "He doesn't seem to learn very quickly."

"Malachite, are you *drunk*?" I icily asked him, fists on my hips.

"Not at all! Get you home safe and... safely... what's that sound?"

"We'll be going now," I told Sarvaan. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Of course. If you ever have any alchemical needs or find other supplies come on back," he offered. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"I'll keep it in mind. Good day."

"Good day!"

Once outside- Malachite generally pointing himself in the right direction and managing to not fall over- he leaned against the stone wall of the keep.

"It's so nice here."

"Dear, I don't think you're in any condition to get us home like this. What do you suggest we do about that, humm?"

"Just make me big, I can handle it!"

"His blood alcohol content will not change, I take it?" Hanz asked. "He will have more mass, it's true, but he'll have more blood as well."

"I don't think it will help," I agreed. "I guess we just walk it off, and see how long it takes." *Does he have a problem? I mean this doesn't happen that often. Or am I just rationalizing?*

Suddenly the voice rang in our minds again. "Stop fooling around! We have work to do! There is but one vessel left. We are so very close. The last group that worked to imprison me was a guild of humans who have long since passed from this earth. Even their graves are no longer known in this time. But I know. I know all.

"The vessel was buried with the head of the guild, in a tomb designed to kill all those foolish enough to enter. This will be your most difficult task. Before you can even enter the tomb, you will have to disable the defense network built around it. I can show you the way inside. Once there, you will need to split up and simultaneously activate a series of switches on opposite sides of this gauntlet of pain. They thought they could hide their secrets from me, but they were mistaken." The voice faded.

"That's concerning," Hanz admitted. "The 'last group' that imprisoned this spirit? There was more than one group? How many times has this thing been locked up, exactly?"

"Theems awfully chatty now?" Snarly wondered. "That doethn't them right either?"

"It does sound like a bad guy again," I admitted. "Still, our course is set in stone, there's no way we're going to second guess ourselves at this point. Not going to go through that again."

"It wath being figurative, right? It wathn't literally buried with just the guild leader'th head, right?"

"I'm sure it means 'the head' as in the 'lead man' of the guild. Not just his severed head, no," Hanz assured him.

"I hope you're right!"

"I mean, with everything we've seen I wouldn't exactly be *surprised* if his severed head suddenly started flying around and shooting beams out of the eyesockets. Or, like, dropped slugs out of the mouth or something. I mean it's us..."

"Don't jinx uth!"

"Here's the solution!" Malachite announced, popping the cork off a bottle of something. He had been rummaging around in his pockets the whole time, and seemed to hold up something triumphantly. "Bottoms up!"

"You don't need more- and it's gone," I sighed, as he upended the bottle in his mouth. He blinked a few times.

"Ah, sorry about that. Didn't expect their stuff to be quite that potent. Anyway, heading back to town? I'm ready to go." He corked the bottle, as eating the glass would have been quite odd, and put it back in his pocket. He came up off the wall and stretched, looking at me expectantly.

"What just happened?" Hanz asked.

"Potion I bought earlier. Cure poison. Didn't expect to use it like *that*. I got it in case we ran into another of those awful corpse giant things. You know, just in case. I'll have to replace it now though."

"Huh. I have to admit, your foresight can be impressive at times," I told him.

"I married you, didn't I?" he asked with a wink.

We dropped down outside of town and I once again hooked up Athame to the cart, as Malachite said he didn't want to pull the thing. I agreed that was fair and we headed to the front gate.

"Hey, is that cart available?" one of the guards asked. It took me a second to process this, I hadn't expected him to call out to me.

"I hope it's not to haul dead bodies or anything," I joked. "The smell of that lingers for weeks!"

"No, it's to haul wood. I don't have all the details but apparently there was some missed shipment of wood? We're gathering carts and volunteers to go chop some. Or..." He looked Malachite up and down. "Guarding the stuff on the way back. If you already have the cart..." he trailed off.

"I guess we could help," I decided, looking the others over. They didn't seem to care one way or the other. "Just tell us where to go."

"As long as it's just guarding," Malachite agreed. "I had enough swinging around axes and things when we were on the road. Though that was mostly pickaxes for mining but it's the same concept."

Ah yes, our early days. Just scraping by, not really understanding each other. Trying to get this big lug to act in a somewhat civilized manner. At least I've rubbed off on him a little since those days. Then that whole wyvern thing that went down. Ah, what adventures we had! Why, perhaps I should suggest he write a book about them once the Gloom is dealt with! I would be interested in his perspective on our travels in those days.

We spent the rest of the day hauling wood around, keeping our eyes open for any monster attacks on such a large group outside the walls. But nothing happened, and we managed to find two more potions of cure poison before the shops closed. All in all a productive day, but I was worried about this tomb the voice had spoken of. With our luck there would be plenty of undead down there, and they were not going to just let us walk up and barter for the last pot. It was going to be a slog, but hopefully nothing we hadn't seen before. Time would tell.

Chapter 7

“Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.”

The voice in our heads was quite chatty the next day, excitedly leading us exactly where we needed to go in order to find the tomb of the group that imprisoned it. It described every twist and turn of the cave system we had to walk through to get there, and to our surprise there was a hole leading downwards the voice said was our destination.

“I’ll go first,” Malachite announced, peering into the hole. “It looks like a gentle enough slope we should be able to slide down it and not break our legs at the bottom. But I better be ready to catch you,” he looked at me specifically, “just in case.”

“Of course,” I told him, nodding. *Of course I’m going to have the telekinesis spell going on myself when I slide down into a dark and potentially hostile cave after being led there by a mysterious voice I can’t exactly trust.* I looked to my left and right, my magical allies were both out and ready for action, so we were as prepared as we could be. Malachite jumped into the hole, controlling his decent with a claw and slid out of sight. Meanwhile I cast on myself and rose into the air slightly.

“As he expects me next I’ll go in,” I told the others. “Try not to land on me, I’ll get out of the way right away. Give me a count of... thirty. Just in case there’s a long drop and I need to catch you with magic.”

“Thounth good,” Snarly agreed, and Hanz nodded.

“Come along fellows,” I needlessly told my companions, who followed after me.

The drop wasn’t that bad, I didn’t need to catch the others after all. I entered the chamber, landing softly from my controlled decent and found a pulsing red light coming from everywhere and nowhere, some kind of siren, and Malachite gripping his sword as a bunch of undead were struggling to pull themselves up from the ground.

“Quite the welcome!” Malachite shouted to me, pointing.

“I see them!” I shouted back. “Think they’re friendly?”

“Oh sure, very friendly!”

Hanz dropped in behind me and looked around. “You went to a rave and didn’t invite me?”

“A what?” we both shouted.

“Never mind.”

Snarly dropped by the time the undead were standing, it looked like we were in the center of two groups. Two ‘advanced’ types flanked by two ‘underling’ types unless I missed my guess. Malachite headed for the one in red and Hanz raised their beam weapon. Snarly did some acrobatic move away from us, probably going to get behind them so I shrugged and yelled at Hanz.

“I’m borrowing your ax!”

“Go for it?”

I cast, taking the ax in my telekinetic grip and slamming it into the more advanced undead opposite Malachite. It staggered back, the enchantment on the ax coming to life and wounding it further, but it didn’t fall. At my side, Boline and an ‘underling’ zombie clashed, she took a swipe at the thing and started knocking it around. Bessom meanwhile sent a sliver of wind energy into the other one. I lost track of Snarly, he had gone to help Malachite so I focused on my three, yanking the ax back out of the chest so it could be used again. Hanz tried to finish it off but it seemed it completely ignored the beam weapon.

“Blast!” they swore.

No, that was the opposite of a blast. It had no effect.

I had the ax chop itself into the “blue leader” and that made it fall, so I looked around for a new target. Boline was still being harassed not that far from me so while a zombie went for Hanz I figured

their metal body would hardly be of interest and they could take care of themselves. I didn't want that zombie breaking off from my companion and coming at me so I directed the ax into the back of the zombie, making it fall.

With Boline freed up he pounced on the one fighting Hanz, knocking it over and allowing them to start putting shots into it, so I looked around for a new target. Bessom sent elemental energy into the one to the left, it seemed the "red leader" was down thanks to Malachite and Snarly, who was now trying to get into position to attack the one on the right. So I sent the ax hurling across the room to the one on the left, chopping it as Bessom hit it again. It went down. It was a simple matter to finish off the last remaining one, and while Malachite gathered up the once again unmoving corpses and set them all on fire I looked around the room. Naturally I also returned the ax with a flourish. There were two doors at opposite ends, some strange gratings here we probably should leave alone, and a vague sense of magic. I couldn't pinpoint it enough to turn off the weird light or alarm, so we would have to make do.

Snarly had scratched at the door for some reason, maybe some sort of magical trap? He was working on the lock with his lockpicks, and announced he had gotten it open. Malachite pointed in a general way indicating "you want to go this way?" and I figured one way was as good as another at this point.

Strange our 'buddy' has gone silent though. A little more direction would be nice right about now.

We got into position and he threw the door open, stepping back a bit and hefting his sword. The room was disappointingly empty though. We all shared a look but Snarly was hefting one of his knives and threw it at the back wall of the place. As it hit the wall I was surprised to see three large circular designs at the back light up, and three enormous creatures came into existence in the center of the room. They roared and reared up, the temperature plunging and an icy wind blasting through the door. Tentacles came out of their mouths and they dropped to all fours, looking like weird demonic bears as big as the bears we saw when trying to get that root for Hale. Wow, that seemed like such a long time ago. *Right, focus, Orchid.* Malachite and I shared a concerned look, but his head whipped around as Snarly was about to casually stroll through the door as if nothing was amiss. He was grabbed and lifted, and gave Malachite an indignant look like "what's the big idea?"

"Don't you see those creatures in there? We have to make a plan!"

"What creatures?"

His mouth dropped open. "What do you mean, what creatures?"

"Close the door at least!" I screamed at him, though the bear looking things didn't seem too concerned with rushing through it to take us on.

"You think that'll slow down something that size? Okay..." He slammed it shut and we backed away.

"What's going on?" Hanz asked. "Is something wrong? It's still just an empty room."

"Oh Lord," Malachite groaned. "Now what?"

"Just a second!" I yanked Hanz's arm and dragged him over to Snarly, and started casting. I hoped I could get it done before those things came smashing into this room and for a wonder, I didn't have anything to worry about. My spell went off without a hitch and Hanz, Snarly, and myself became light.

"Okay, we're protected," I cried in relief. "I'll support you as I can but it's basically up to you."

"Against the three of them? Ice bears? Are you crazy? I couldn't handle one half starved circus bear before."

"You just didn't want to hurt it. Slice those things up!"

"No really, what's going on?" Hanz asked.

"Creatures appeared, I think only those with mana cores can see them. I think some demons are like that. You're made of light, so you don't have to dodge something you can't see. If they attack you they'll only hurt themselves and you'll be fine. Just stay put while we deal with them."

“Deal with what?” Snarly asked.

“Three ice looking bear things,” Malachite told him. “Mean looking critters, where are they?”

We all looked to the door, which had stayed mercifully unbroken.

Going invisible and intangible would be a bit much, that’s our schtick. Are they going to pop up out of nowhere like they just did? I looked around nervously. I was essentially invulnerable like this, but Malachite wasn’t. If they went for him...

We waited.

Nothing happened.

“Think they vanished again when the door was closed?” I asked.

“That would be way too much to ask,” Malachite scoffed. “We should make a plan to deal with them.”

“I think the plan is the same,” I told him. “I’ll be like this, and support you as I can. You might be able to take a hit or two from one of them but I can’t. As long as they stay in there and I don’t have to worry about these two who can’t see them.” I indicated the others. “Together we should be able to take them.”

“Why not give me that spell too?”

“I could! If you wanted to be here all day. You would not be attacking with a sword at that point, but a sword shaped extension of yourself that was made of light.”

“And that’s a problem how? Because it sounds amazing.”

“The damage done in that form is a fraction of my skill, and according to the spell formula it’s even lower because it’s light. In the tests I’ve done it’s best to consider this defensive only, I never figured I would be using it offensively.” *As skilled as I am, the reduction is severe so it really doesn’t become worth it.*

“I see. Okay, I have a plan!”

He had a strange gleam in his eye and was getting out lamp oil.

“No!”

“Yes!” he countered. “Come on, it’s been ages!”

“Ugh, fine,” I agreed. “But only because they’re magical constructs and we can close the door.”

The plan was to head into the astral (after dropping my elemental body of course) and drop the flaming rags in the corner. Malachite would then shield me as I exploded them with my fire making magic, hopefully at least weakening them to some extent and then he would hold them off while I got the elemental body spell back up. I hated to use one of my necklace tokens except as a last resort, and I figured I could speed up the grade 9 spell at least a little bit. They would be reeling from the fire and Malachite would be in front of me- it would be fine. I would support him and not worry about avoiding their attacks, and we would win the day with ease. *Actually, I’m going to phase myself first. That I’m confident I can get off in no time at all. Once phased it will allow me to take a bit more time on the elemental body spell, of course taking into account the added concentration on that spell dragging me down so maybe it’s a wash? I’ll do it anyway, it’s safer.*

We headed inside, and the three creatures were just milling about seemingly without any purpose at all. *Strange.* Malachite tossed the flaming ball into the corner as planned and I got into position behind his wings, trying to get as much cover as possible. I peeked around and cast, making the three take a fireball to their everything as I dropped the astral spell and cast the fire spell as quickly as I could. They roared and charged, hardly seeming to be bothered by the flames at all.

Because of course they wouldn’t be.

I phased myself as planned, but I noticed Malachite was really being pressured by the things, taking a hit on the leg and crying out, and almost losing his sword as one tried to rip it away from him.

Slight change of plans! I cast the elemental body spell with more haste than I would have liked, a short prayer to the patron of lost causes mixed in there. Dropping the phase I grabbed Malachite and we were both light.

“Huh?”

“I know, not the plan, but those things seemed a lot tougher than I expected. You okay?”

“No, they got my leg pretty good.” Meanwhile they were trying to swipe through us and not getting anywhere. “This is pretty wild.”

“I hoped it would come in handy. Let’s do what we can, don’t put too much effort in though this is going to be a real slog.”

And it was. No matter how hard Malachite swung his sword or claws the three were barely injured, so he agreed using this offensively, at least in his case, was a real waste. “But you would probably benefit, given you can just slap someone and probably do more damage than you would otherwise.”

“Are you calling me weak, dear?”

“Do you know how careful I have to be so I don’t snap you in half when we’re in bed?”

“And I appreciate it, believe me.”

“My ankles are bigger around than your arms.”

“Now now, there’s no need to be mean about it.”

“Just making an observation, that’s all. I mean look at your thighs compared to my arms! There’s no comparison. Man I could go for some chicken right now.”

“Are you saying I have flabby thighs?”

“Are you saying I have flabby arms?”

“Hummmm,” we both went.

“Plus it’s more about technique,” he went on, changing the subject. “You don’t use knives or swords or have claws like me. And this way you don’t need them, as your potential damage doesn’t change. Just use a slap and forget about learning to use a sword properly. It’s perfect for you.”

“Good save.”

With the frost bears dead and both of us back to normal I healed up Malachite and was making progress when I smacked myself in the head and considered more forceful methods. Like slamming my head into the wall repeatedly.

“What’s up?” Malachite asked, worried I had a brain worm or something no doubt.

“I’m wearing the stupid boots!” I shouted, wiggling them at him. “I was never in danger from the fire. I totally forgot about it!”

“Well, you have a lot to keep track of,” he diplomatically decided. “All those spells, I couldn’t keep them straight. And your two creatures, and the tokens. It’s okay to forget things sometimes.”

“Is it though? Is it?”

We headed back to tell the others of our great victory, and they came through so Snarly could work on the next door. Again he announced it was trapped in some way, and worked to undo and unlock it. I studied the now burned up circles on the walls.

Those things seemed too big and powerful to be simple ally spells, though I know there is a more advanced one than the one I use. Maybe it was just that. But this is an awfully big spell symbol, maybe it’s been refined since they used it?

We got the door open and to our surprise the floor was lava. We could see there was a place on the other side of the lava where it was clear and there was another door, but we didn’t want to deal with that and closed it again.

"I believe it's time to head into the astral," Hanz announced. "We seem to be at the bottom level, and there is no point to battling magical guardian constructs half of us can't even see. Let us skip the protections here and move on to the main event, as it were."

"I guess it's true," I admitted. "The undead have been here all this time, it's not like they're going to climb up that shaft and escape into the world. We don't even really have to fight them, much less magical creatures like they said."

"Tho leth go!" Snarly agreed.

"Right, grab on..."

We went past the lava room and saw half of our destination, at least as we understood it from what the voice had told us. There was a plate set in the floor, one of the ones we needed to stand on to turn off the security here and reveal the actual resting place of the vessel. But there was something else in the room too, some kind of stone construct that was active and looking around.

"Oh, a treasure chest!" Malachite almost squealed. "Gimme!"

"Later dear," I told him. "Focus."

"Yes, a stone construct could be troublesome to deal with," Hanz told us. "At least I can see it."

"Leth see whath in the other direction," Snarly told us. No reason not to, so we headed back that way. We passed back through the first room, then a strange empty hallway in a sort of reverse L shape. Looking around Snarly announced each floor stone in here had something carved into it, and this was repeated on the walls as well. *Seems like a lot of work to go though, wonder what it means.*

We continued on, past another room with more undead in it, and finally to a square room with the second pressure plate and 3 more of the stone statue things.

"Not two on either side?" Malachite wondered, walking around them. "Seems unbalanced."

"At least we can see how difficult the one is before we tackle the three," Hanz decided.

"I think I'll just shrink it," I announced, rubbing the back of my head. "That seems easiest, right?"

"Then just stomp on it until it stops moving. Good plan!" Malachite cheered. "Let's head back."

I almost didn't get the spell to work when we dropped back into the first room, I could feel the thing resisting it. Which was unfair in my estimation, as it was just magically animated stone. How can stone resist magic? It can't. Ergo, this shouldn't be able to either. But suddenly it clicked and the thing shrank down, allowing the others to smash it. We now all stood around the first trigger.

"The voice said the security would end when we stood on both," Hanz reasoned. "Can we somehow not fight the other three and just drop into that room from the astral? Thus triggering both plates at once and ending the lockdown?"

"Oh, oh, we could use Orchidth thummonth," Snarly excitedly exclaimed. "Make them vanith and then we know thath the thignal."

"That would work," I agreed. "I can drop them both at once."

"I was thinking more about dropping right on top of them," Hanz explained. "Leaving the astral directly atop them."

"That would also work," I was forced to admit. "And is probably safer... if it really does shut things down. I'll ask."

Soon I had a "Yes" answer to the question "Does stepping on both pressure plates disable all security measures in this area including stone golems?" With that in mind Hanz went with me to the other chamber again, Malachite in position in this room being the heaviest. With them in position above the plate (and invisible, and with me heading back to the first chamber where it was safest) I dropped the astral spell and was rewarded with blessed silence and no more pulsing red light. To my surprise a passage opened between the two switch chambers making me start readying my elemental body spell

again but it wasn't needed. The stone figures didn't move an inch. We had done it, the first floor was done!

Chapter 8

“He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.”

We collected some old looking coins from the first switch room and Malachite looked over the contents of the chest. It turned out to be some odd looking armor, with a gauge stuck into it that was at a 5 of 10. He already had armor, Snarly was obviously way too small, Hanz already had their armor enchanted against cold, and as for me? We had already established I was not beefy enough to lug 10kg of steel around on my body. *Plus I think armor interferes with magic in some way?* So it wasn't immediately useful but Malachite agreed to carry the thing and we headed back to the main room. A somewhat rotted wooden ladder was now present, and he was trying to figure out how to get the chest down there with him.

“I'll just float it down. Heck, I'll *ride* it down. The shaft looks wide enough,” I told him. “Better be careful too, I don't really trust that ladder to hold your weight.”

“That'll work.”

“Can't you make it safer?” Hanz asked.

“Oh yeah, magic!”

Dropping into the lower chamber after casting a few repair spells on the ladder we came to a long passageway through the mountain. There were no side passages so it was an easy matter to light the place up and follow it, entering finally into another large chamber populated by suits of armor. Six of them, spaced evenly around the room.

“I've seen this movie,” Hanz announced. “They'll come to life once we pick up the vessel.”

“Tho don't pick up the vethel yet!” Snarly told them.

“I wasn't planning on it.”

We looked around, there was a stone door out of the room, and a sarcophagus set in the center. The clay vessel was at the foot, and that was it. Malachite and Hanz went over to separate suits of armor and started trying to pull them apart. Neither managed it, nor could they take the weapons from their hands.

“Figures,” Malachite spat. “We'll have to deal with them one way or another. Now what?”

“If you can give me a couple of minutes I can sculpt the stone around their legs,” I decided. “If they do come to life they'll have a hard time getting out of that.”

“Do it. Snarly, let's check the door.”

“You got it!”

I got busy casting the minute long spell six times while the others checked out the rest of the place, reporting there was a second and third chamber beyond, and the third held another ladder up to what must be freedom from this place. And another chest, Malachite was particularly interested in that.

“Figures,” Hanz reported. “If we knew where the exit was we could have just come down that way. Strange this voice didn't just lead us there but instead through the front. Did they really not know about it? Seems sus. Old video games were notorious for this by the way.”

“Old what?” we all asked.

“Never mind.”

“Is this even real?” Malachite asked, pointing to the vessel. “It's not actually in the sarcophagus or something right? This has to be a decoy, they wouldn't have just left it here.”

“It feels the same to my magical senses,” I reported a moment later. “So I think it's the real deal.”

“In that case, I propose we simply grab it and go astral,” Hanz decided. “Then, when everything starts activating around here- as is blatantly obvious is going to happen- we simply go back the way we

came? We can collapse the tunnel if pressed, one way or the other, and get back up the newly repaired ladder. Fighting our way to the other ladder seems redundant in the extreme.”

“But the other treasure chest!” whined Malachite. “We can’t just leave it.”

“I’m wary of touching *anything* in this room or any other.”

“We can see if it’s worth trying to get it,” I told him. “I’ll take you into the astral and you can stick your head into it. See what’s in there.” *I want to make sure it’s clear anyway. It would just be our luck they trapped this location in both the astral and purgatory, because they thought of that too, and we step over and get blown up somehow. Better to find out that fact now.*

“Yes!” He pumped a fist. “You’re the best, Orchid.”

“Yes, yes, any and all praise accepted. Be right back, all.”

We headed to the astral and into the next room, where we discovered the chest had a lot more teeth than a treasure chest should actually have. Which is none, by the way. A treasure chest should have no teeth at all.

“Some kind of creature?” he asked. “It just looks like this?”

“Clearly. Let’s head back.”

“I want to check the sarcophagus too, before we go back!”

“Whatever you want, dear.”

We headed back and he stuck his head inside.

“There’s a dead guy inside. Nothing else.”

“Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

We gathered around the vessel and I readied my spell. Nodding I took Hanz’s hand who was holding Snarly’s hand who was holding Malachite’s hand who grabbed up the clay pot. I had shrunk down the chest so we could easily carry it with us, and the place went active again despite there being no obvious switch or anything under the vessel that would be a trigger. A stone panel slammed closed over the obvious exit, and the suits of armor started trying to struggle out of their stone prisons. We didn’t care. We left. I had to go up the ladder first and sculpt our way out as the original cover for the ladder was back but that was easy enough. I then lifted everyone, one at a time, out the original passageway we slid down, and we were out!

“Hate being underground,” Malachite complained, stretching his wings. “This is much better.”

“My captors were more clever than I anticipated, I’m afraid,” the voice rang in our heads again. “Something blocked my influence from reaching inside the tomb. Luckily, you were able to navigate the dangers without my assistance. I am happy you found my prison and that you decided to be the avatars of my release. After all this time, I will finally be free. Return to me in the chamber and we can put this behind us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he called to the sky. “Tomorrow! We aren’t doing it today.”

Wait, I thought these were the keys to the prison, he was locked up in that chamber? But now he just said we found his prison, meaning the clay jar. I’m so confused.

We headed back home and I looked the armor over, augmenting my skill and feeling out the magic that was on it. It was enchanted, but was half used up. Basically it would negate the next five times whoever wore it took damage, which seemed a bit inelegant to me. If you got scratched it would activate, or if you got your head chopped off it would activate. However one of those was more serious than the other. It should only negate *lethal* damage, that is damage that was about to kill you. But then, I hadn’t made it. Plus none of us could really wear it, so there was that.

We spent the night and gathered up all three vessels in the morning, flying them over to the cave and set them down where the voice said to.

"Now what?" Malachite asked. "Some kind of ritual? Or is that enough?"

"I'm not sure, I've heard what you've heard."

"If I with making it," Snarly announced, "I would make it as completh as possible to open the thell. Not juth a button at the end of a long corridor."

"Yes, we could have entered the corridor a lot closer to the button," Hanz reported, looking around. "Do you hear something?"

It was true, there was a faint vibration in the walls which was growing, and a feeling of power even Snarly looked concerned about. But suddenly it was over, and before us floated some swirling green mist in the shape of many long, intertwined tendrils.

Oh no, we released the wrong thing! This isn't a man calling for help it's a trick by an ancient and otherworldly being that we will now have to fight! "I had almost forgotten what it felt like to not be imprisoned. It is quite wondrous. I am sure that before too long, I will forget the horrid feeling of powerlessness. It is time to leave this realm," the Voice said.

Uh, we don't want to go anywhere? It's not attacking?

"There is much to be remedied from my prolonged absence. But first, I must give you a proper thanks. I shall hold up my end of the bargain and bestow upon you great power and wealth." There was a green light that washed over us, and then the light and the 'creature' were gone.

I felt something. Some deeper connection to magic itself, I was sure of it. Spread out over my core and so somewhat diluted but still there, I felt my spells would be just a little bit more powerful now. "I guess it actually lived up to its end of the-" I looked to the others, who were looking up at something. "What's-" I looked up myself. "Oh."

"What happened?" Malachite asked, panicked. "You all got smaller? Why are you all smaller? What happened to my clothes? Orchid, what's going on?"

He was standing there with the remains of his clothes and armor barely hanging on to him, as he now towered over all of us. He was the size of those minitours we had met, Tannenbaum and Freighttrain.

"We're not smaller," Hanz told him. "You're bigger."

"Oh no!"

No, no, no! I wasn't supposed to have to deal with this for like a hundred years! Why did that tentacle thing have to pick this as the 'great power' to give him? This is awful! "Yeah, it's not going to fit anymore," I mused my eyes wide and not really processing what I was seeing just yet. But you had to use humor in situations like this. There was really no alternative.

"What?"

"That horn ornament I made you," I told him, pointing. "Look it's all cracked and barely hanging on your horn now. I'll have to make you a bigger one."

"This is no time for jokes!"

"We're gonna need a bigger houth," Snarly announced. "I want one with a bigger room!"

Take some of the junk out of yours, it'll seem bigger. Like trimming the bush around a deck. "This is going to be a problem," I agreed. *A big problem.*

"I'll say, none of my clothes are going to fit me now. My sword is like a toothpick, my armor is all wrecked up. I won't fit in our bed and I just bought that!"

"Is that a sorted priority list or simply random?" Hanz asked. "I'm interested in the thought process that produced it."

"What? Never mind that, what are we going to do? We fight in caves, and tombs, I'll never fit in half the places we usually go now!"

"I really don't know, Malachite, I really don't know."

He leaned against the wall trying to get his thoughts in order while we gathered up his stuff to take back with us. He was just going to have to deal with flying us back naked, it wasn't like I could

shrink him, dress him, then cast grow on him so his stuff magically enlarged again. That would just end the shrink spell and put us right back where we were right now.

“What’th this?” Snarly asked, holding up a strange stone tablet.

“One second. By the way, do *you* feel any different? Snarly? Hanz?”

“Unsure,” Hanz reported. “I believe dormant modules I was unaware of are about to come online. This may grant me new abilities. It is most curious. Could they have been placed there in the past somehow? We have some evidence these extra-planer beings are not limited to our perception of linier time. But how would they have been acquired? Or were they always there and I was simply unaware of them, but what would be the purpose of giving me capability and denying me access to it? They aren’t heated seats or a self-driving mode. There would be no logic to it.”

“I’m not thure,” Snarly said.

“I just want to make sure we were *all* ‘rewarded.’ Sorry, what were you saying? This?” I took the tablet, it had some funny writing on it. “I don’t think it was there before. Is this part of the ‘great wealth’ that thing spoke of? Some wealth, it’s a rock, I can *make* them with magic. Maybe they don’t have rocks where that being is from and so they *think* it’s great wealth?”

“Can you read it?”

“With my magic, sure. Let’s get Malachite back home and settled and we can look into this later.”

“Okay.”

Somehow we made it home and I shrunk Malachite down so he could fit into things again, and we went shopping. “In the big and tall section,” Hanz seemed to joke, but I didn’t get the reference. He had to commission some pieces that would take time to make, as well as a bigger sword.

“Armor this big is going to really weigh me down,” he decided. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do about it.”

“One thing at a time,” I agreed. “We’ll have to see if I can reshape our bedroom without putting the rest of the house at risk. Not to mention our front door.”

“You’ll think of something.”

“Let’s hope so.”

When we got back Snarly had the coins they found out on display, it turned out they were gold but smaller than our standard. Which was saying something, as our coins were pretty small! He said they could be worth something to a collector, but finding that person might take some time.

“We’ve got time now,” Malachite told him, large again after taking all his clothes off so they were not ruined when he got home. We figured he could sell his old stuff, and Hanz suggested a bakery but only if we had the ‘merchant perk’ which made them electronically wheeze with laughter but shake their head when we didn’t join in. “I’ll take a few days to get me some new clothes and a new sword. I can’t go out like this!”

I mean, I’m not complaining but you would get some funny looks.

“What is on the agenda for the near future?” Hanz asked.

“You know, I’m actually not sure,” I admitted. “No cult activity I’m aware of we need to stop at the moment. No weird tasks by the guard. We could look more into the crystals, maybe go back there with our ‘upgrades’ and try to figure out that pedestal guarded by the remnant. Otherwise I’m at sort of a loss. Do you have something you want to do?”

“There is one location on our backlog,” they reported. “The so called well of the unfortunate.”

“That describes us,” Malachite lamented. “Maybe we can toss some of ours down the well and-Ow!” His horns scraped the ceiling.

“Ben Dover!” Snarly told him.

"You are going to have to stoop around here my love," I agreed. "And watch out with your tail!" He smashed a stone vase with flowers in it to the ground. Water and flowers spilled out. "Never mind."

"Aarg, everything is so small now!"

"It's fine. We'll figure something out." *And we better do it fast.*

He carefully went to the bedroom and I sat down with the tablet we had found. A quick casting of the magic to read any language and I announced what was written there. "The creator has made a request for our spoils. The 12th letter holds the key."

"That's clear as mud," Hanz remarked.

"Indeed," I agreed, leaning back and looking it over. "The creator is the Lord. Why would They want earthly treasure when They have all the splendor of Heaven and in truth They made all things anyway?"

"There used to be a tithing system back in the day," they reported. "You were supposed to give a certain percentage of your earnings to the church."

"Like a thax?" Snarly asked, confused.

"In a way, yes. It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to Heaven. That was their reasoning. If only! Oh Elon, what did you find after death, I must inquire..."

"Who?"

"No one of consequence."

"Anyway," I put in. "The twelfth letter of this tablet? But I have no idea what that letter is, my magic is letting me *understand* this text but not exactly *read* it. I mean sure I can count to twelve but is this language read left to right? Right to left? Bottom up? I have no idea. So which is the twelfth letter any--"

"I can't fit on the bed!" Malachite roared. "I knew it. I knew it was going to be pointless. This sucks!"

You know, he's come a long way. Time was, he would be cursing up a storm in this situation. You have to admire his restraint now. He really did make an effort after he learned I didn't exactly approve of that sort of language. It wasn't exactly taking the Lord's name in vain, but it was close. You start to talk like that, and you're one slip of the tongue from blasphemy. How long is his tongue now, come to think of it...

My cheeks were getting a little red but I shook off those thoughts. "Yes dear," I shouted up to him. "I'll make you a nice little lair with some blankets and you can cradle your big diamond tonight, how does that sound? I can get out the trade bars too if it'll help you feel better."

"... Fine," he finally agreed.

"I hope it's referring to the tablet directly," Hanz agreed as I turned back to them. "As this script is unknown to me, trying to determine the twelfth letter of the alphabet used to write it will be practically impossible. What I wish to know is the key to what? Giving our spoils? I do not think we wish to do that, so why would we investigate further?"

"Exactly. Or maybe the spoils have already been delivered, and we could go get them using the twelfth letter as the key. I mean if 'the creator' hasn't taken them by now, they probably won't and they are just going to waste somewhere. That was the 'wealth' part of the being's promise to us. Why they couldn't just provide a map is beyond me of course." *Though they may not perceive the world as we do.*

"Speculation may be diverting, but it hardly productive at this time. Secure the tablet somewhere and let us take care of our more immediate problems."

"Yes, our big problem," I agreed. "How many blankets do we have?"

"I shall provide mine, as I am not using it currently."

"You can't have mine," Snarly announced protectively.

"That's okay," I agreed. *We don't want your smelly blanket anyway. No offense.*

With Malachite hunkered down in his new nest, grumbling about why otherworldly beings just went and messed with you anyway who did they think they were? I tried to console him and hugged as much of him as I could. "I'm sure tomorrow will bring us many fine opportunities we wouldn't have had now that you're bigger. Wait and see. This was always coming it seems, it's just the suddenness that's got you down. Tomorrow will be brighter, I guarantee it."

"Yeah, yeah."

Little did I know, I should have kept my damn mouth shut.

Chapter 9

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”

I was awoken in the dark by the sound of an explosion from outside, and jerked upright, eyes darting about the darkness. Another blast sounded from nearby, and I jumped out of bed.

“Malachite, wake up, I think we’re under attack or something!” I shouted.

“I heard!”

“Oh!” That set me back a step. *Wait, he’s not going to take a half hour to wake up? Praise God!*

He scrambled up out of his nest and grumbled about not having any equipment now. “Sure, attack in the dead of night,” he spat. “When I have no clothes, no sword, no armor, no magic. Sure, why not?” He rushed the door and started trying to squeeze through it. I looked around.

Do I take the time to put on the boots? My necklace? Grab some tokens? No, best to just answer this attack in kind with my magic directly. I’m sure Malachite and Hanz can take care of things. I followed after, Malachite basically on all fours as he squished himself through the hallway. I steadied myself, taking a deep breath and building the box around my emotions. *They’ll regret attacking one of the Spellweaver clan.* Another explosion went off and I would swear I heard Snarly crying out from somewhere. *Shoot, hang on!* I raised my hands, casting for Besom but cursing the strain it would put on me. *Maybe I should have grabbed the necklace at least...*

We made it to the front door, firelight flickering outside so something was on fire. Thankfully the house was mostly stone so it would be tough to actually burn down. Malachite wasted no time, smashing through the door and causing it to fly forward, then bounce off something invisible around three figures in the night.

“It’s not wise to rouse a dragon in the night!” Malachite screamed at them.

They sort of put a hand to their ears like “What?”

I started casting as Besom shot forward. Looking around the now splintered doorframe I saw at least half a dozen people in robes out on the lawn, making me wonder where all these mages had come from. *Did they send every mage in the cult out here tonight? Good! Let us deliver unto them a blow they shall reel from for years to come.*

Ice spells pelted Malachite as the mages unloaded on him, driving him back a little.

“Get outside the doorframe again!” I told him.

“Right, we’ll show these guys!”

What just happened to Besom? Oh, of course a bunch of random cultist mages would know the dismiss spell randomly. Like, seriously how often does that actually come up in day to day life? Nobody is going to learn that spell. It’s a waste of time. But nobody told them that. Aarg!

“Grow!” I cast as he headed outside again. I made him his usual “flight” size figuring he was most used to that size, and he grinned, taking a step and smashing into the barrier around the three mages. He too bounced off, making me wonder just how good these guys were, anyway?

Smart. Keep some mages protected in there, they’re the ones maybe maintaining spells on the others? But stupid. Why have them here at all in that case? They can just stay home and maintain the spells.

Malachite took another spell to the face.

Wait what? He shouldn’t feel any attack at his size. Something weird is going on here.

He switched targets, clawing at a mage nearby and slamming him into the side of the house. But he looked at his claws, like he didn’t think he had done anything maybe.

“Needle!” I cast, aiming for the one in the center of the group of three. *I hope this works. The needle simply appears where I want it, so it should get through the barrier right?*

It did, the man in the center jerking back. He pointed and said something, and the three raised their hands in unison. A black circle surrounded me, and I had to do something. *Suppress it! But against three? That's not going to work.* I raised my hands to try casting my spell against it but suddenly Malachite was there, shoving me away from it. The spell seemed stationary, it didn't follow me, but he took the full force of it. I watched in horror as his eyes widened and he seemed to simply dissolve before me.

"No!" I shouted, reaching out to him. But it was too late, he was gone. The box around my emotions trembled, but held. This was bad, very bad, but I couldn't allow myself to be distracted. *There's too many of them, never would have done a frontal attack had we known. Retreat is our only option.* I cast a familiar spell, and found myself in the astral, looking "down" at the figures around the house and the fire. *Our tree is on fire? Why set a tree on fire? Poor Timothy! Oh no Snarly!* I could barely see two men with bows heading around the house and they stopped to nudge something with a foot. I got up and rushed over there, the men walking away making me believe he was dead too. *You've got to be kidding me!* I screeched to a halt and cast again, intending to do my "little trick" we had used several times in the past. I held onto the one dimensional step spell, released the first one I cast, touched him, and let the second one whisk us back there before anyone could see and stop me. Snarly was in bad shape. His one leg was completely gone, and I had no idea how badly he was hurt otherwise.

I can't use a healing spell, it will heal the stump of the leg and that will solidify that form in his aura. He'll be stuck that way permanently, as regeneration magic will 'read' his aura and choose the one legged form imprinted there. But I can't let him bleed to death either. There is one chance, I hope this works. I slowly cast the elemental body spell, slower than I would have liked but I figured he could hold on another second. I could not backfire this spell and get us both hurt, because then we were both dead. *Curse this infernal dimension step spell, why do I have to maintain it?* I got the spell off, and we both became light. Now, instead of bleeding, small motes of light lifted away from his leg, but I figured that was fine. *The spell says any damage taken in this form is regenerated. That's damage taken in this form. He'll be fine.* I hefted him up as best I could, *why do you still have mass? We're both made of light now. Thank goodness it was him, I couldn't lift Malachite even at half the size,* and struggled to get him to the front of the house. *Though floating him would have been possible. I'll see the situation and determine what to do. If they've not found Hanz I'll somehow get them out of there, then use my fire starting spell on the tree maybe? They are not wandering around our house and looting it. I would rather blow it up and collapse it than let them search for our treasures and- hold on.*

I stopped dead. Looking around there were no mages in sight. There was the burnt remains of a mage. There was another. And another. Looking left and right I was astonished. *What just happened? Did Hanz just kill a half a dozen mages in the time it took me to get Snarly and get back over here? That's impossible- but wait. The barrier was transparent. We could see the mages inside. Could his light based weapon reach them? Did they cast something in there again thinking they were safe and got hit? Have they turned this whole thing around?* I saw a flash from inside and turned in that direction, heading back into the house. I didn't see Hanz but I saw their handiwork, more dead men with smoldering holes shot through them. Three of them, and another flash I rushed towards showed me a fourth. *I don't believe it. They took out the entire group by themselves. Have they been holding out on us? I'm glad they're on our side. Were they actually some kind of assassin unit when they were made, and this is actually their real function?* I shook my head. *Worry about that later.*

I dropped back down into the mortal plane and called out for Hanz, who stepped out of nowhere. "Snarly is hurt," I told them. "We have to get him to a church. My healing magic is exactly the wrong thing for him. But I think they would know what he needed."

"Very well. I will find Malachite and meet you there. With money, as they will want cash for the service."

Which is stupid, they're a church and healing magic should be free. "Don't bother. He got hit by something. He's gone."

"Gone? Dead?"

I shook my head. "He better not be. No, I have to believe he's been taken to that Gloom dimension again, despite the Gloom letting us go that one time. The magic seemed like special Gloom magic, it wasn't normal. Maybe these guys didn't get the memo. So they put him back there." *They wanted me back there. Well, surprise, jerks. You get a huge draig instead. Have fun with that.*

"So a rescue mission is in order."

"Exactly. Though how we're going to get back there I have no idea. First things first. Get Snarly up and around."

"I must say, you're taking this well."

"That's what it means to be a Spellweaver," I explained. "I offered him my mental discipline technique, we never did get around to practicing it. Huh, I wonder if you could use it? I'll break down later."

"As you say. I just wondered if you weren't actually a remnant yourself, with an undegraded epidermis."

"You know I was made of rock once, right? Come on, let's go."

"Go on, I will grab what funds I can."

I headed out the door, passing members of the guard who gaped at me, but I didn't stop. They could see what happened I was sure, and I had wasted enough time talking to Hanz. Lugging the unconscious body of Snarly with me was a drag, but I finally made it to the church. *Now how do I get inside? Go through the window? This form can at least do that.* But I didn't have to worry, as a concerned looking priest opened the door and looked around. He gestured me forward.

"Yes, come in, come in," he told me. "I was told there was a great tragedy happening, bring him to the infirmary."

The Heavens actually gave information to us on the Earth? That's new. Thanks for the help otherwise, no offence Lord but we could have used some angels a moment ago!

I carried Snarly, following the man, and he indicated I should put Snarly down. "Prepare the spell first," I told him. "I don't know if he's a second from dying or a half hour. But best not to take chances."

"Right you are," he agreed, casting. He nodded and I dropped my spell, the two of us becoming matter again. I dumped him on the table and the priest wrinkled his nose but put the regeneration spell on. Almost at once his leg reformed, and he started breathing easier.

At least something about tonight went right.

"So what happened?"

"We were attacked by a half dozen Gloom cultist mages," I explained. "Tried to set fire to a stone house, don't give them any credit for that. My husband was caught up in some kind of spell though, so I don't know what happened to him."

"I can head back there next, if you need me to?"

I shook my head. "He's just gone. There's no body to treat. I'll get him back."

"My condolences."

"He's fine," I spat. "Probably killing a bunch of cultists in some weird dimension. I'll find him, and I'll bring him back."

"I'm sure you will. Gloom cultists you say? Not familiar with that group."

"Of course not," I muttered sarcastically. "We've only warned the guard about them twice or three times now. You think there would be flyers put up or something. But noooooo. Recruitment must be at an all time high."

Snarly groaned and started to come around. "Did we get them?" he managed.

"Somehow Hanz did," I told him. "They somehow killed *every* cultist out in the yard. We didn't do a thing but run away. It's a little scary actually. Malachite is missing though."

"Oh great."

"Yeah, it's bad. The guard was on their way, hopefully they can get the fire put out."

"Whath our next move?" He sat up, looking around. "Oh, a church."

"Yes, not to be insensitive but there is the matter of the... donation?" the priest reminded us.

"Yes, yes, you'll get it," I snapped. "Hanz is following me with the money."

"I have thome money, grabbed it before I jumped out tha window." Snarly got out his money pouch.

The house came under attack, and your first thought was to grab money and jump out a window? I'm not sure if he's the brightest of us or...

"Someone mention money?" a voice from the hall said. Hanz came into view. "I've got it covered." He flipped a sun to the priest. "Keep the change, padre."

"Why thank you!" the priest gushed, making the coin magically disappear in a way that had nothing to do with magic. "It seems the tales of your generosity were not exaggerated."

"For you," Snarly told him, handing him a moon.

"My, my, so giving," he further gushed. "Let the Lord smile down upon you."

Yeah, or maybe get me my husband back? How about that plan? Could They manage that for me? No? Too much effort? Okay, I'll just do it myself then is that okay? That all 'part of the plan,' oh Lord?

"If there's anything else I can do, please don't hesitate to let me know," he continued.

"We need a seer, or someone like that Deville guy," I decided. "Do you know any? We have..." I looked at Hanz, "the remains of the cultists. We need to see where they came from. Track them back to their lair and hope they have their spellbooks there. Maybe I can figure out how to get us there and rescue Malachite. Or just pop him back here. Whatever."

"I would be happy to use my magic to tell you what I can," the priest agreed. "No further donation required."

"Oh. That would be... wonderful. Thank you."

"If your small friend is ready to walk?"

"Never thought I would walk again," Snarly admitted, jumping down from the table. "I'm ready to go."

"Splendid. Let us go."

When we got back to the house the fires were out, and the guard was milling around waiting for 'the owners' to come back and explain what happened. The bodies were being gathered, and they had been checked. Naturally they carried nothing but the amulet of their order, why would you bring directions to your secret hideout on a raid? So that made sense. Solara was there, basically with her hand out, for her part in putting out the fires. She was in talks with the guard, as it seemed this sort of service *was* subsidized by the town. *Will miracles never cease?* We paid half the fee and she was promised the other half by the guard. I put the door back and repaired it while the priest looked over the men and chose one as the target of his spells.

"I see a crumbling old building," he reported, staring off into space. "A crypt of some sort. Near the mountains. The amulet's mark is carved there. But I do not recognize the place."

"Padre, you've just described three quarters of the places we've found these cultists at. There's no weird rock or tree or something you can describe to narrow it down?"

Wait, what spell is this that lets him see a location like a seer? I've never heard of anything like that! Maybe it's something the Heavens gave him? That could be...

"Alas no. But there is another spell I can perform. It will let me see where he came from, at least. I will have to physically follow it, but we can see, outside of town, what direction is most likely the one you want to follow."

That should be good enough for me. I can do the question spell a dozen times or more, pointing to the map in the direction he shows us. "Is this where the cultists that attacked us came from." Sort of thing. We'll narrow it down. But it's not going to be tonight, I hope you're okay my love.

We followed the priest and he pointed away from town. "This direction," he announced. "That's all I can do for you. I wish you luck."

"Thank you," I told him gratefully. "It's more than I expected."

"May the Lord watch over you." He took his leave.

"What now?" Hanz asked.

"As much as I want to go rushing off, that's a bad idea," I decided. "It's the middle of the night. Snarly is not at 100% given his injuries and I'm exhausted. He's either dead or escaped at this point. The last time it was just a room with no exit. If it's the same this time he can just stay put, the things in the side rooms weren't bashing the doors down to get to us. He'll be fine. We'll rest up tonight and head out tomorrow. No sense wandering around in the dark. It's only a few hours. It'll take us *days* to get anywhere as we can't fly now. He's on his own until then anyway. He'll be fine."

"You said that. I believe you. Very well. I shall leave early and procure the services of some local craftsmen. I know you can probably repair the damage, but best to have an expert look everything over. Plus this will free you up for more worthwhile pursuits. When you have eaten we can be on our way."

On foot. Lovely. At least Athame doesn't get tired... "Okay."

"Thanth for thaving my life, by the way," Snarly told me. "Sorry about Malachite."

"Thanks Snarly. Get some sleep. Busy day tomorrow."

"Right."

I stumbled into my room and threw myself into Malachite's little nest, grabbing his blankets and finally letting the box around my emotions go. I sobbed, the shock of losing him finally able to hit me. *Oh Lord, I prayed, I know You cannot intervene in this life of mine, to bring my husband back to me. (But if you could that would be great) So please just give me the strength I need to rescue him. That's all I ask.*

The next morning Hanz found me out in the back, smashing stone apart with my magic.

"Letting off some steam?" they inquired, looking around at the carnage that was around me.

"Not exactly," I told them, wiping my forehead off. "As I no longer am allowed the *luxury* of simply seeing these cultists as misguided children, whose souls I may be able to save, I'm trying a few things to see how effective they are." *As I can't trust my summons around them, it falls to me to be more involved in any combat. And when I rescue my husband, there will be combat. But what is the 'best' way to use my one attack spell? I think I have a good sense of it now.* "It seems the universe wants them gone, and it has chosen me to be the instrument of that destruction. So be it. This cult will be ground underneath my heel until nothing remains. Are you ready? Let's ride."

"May I request you refreshing my spell symbol first? I used it last night, to great effect. I have instructed the craftsman, and they should be able to do what needs to be done. So when we return the house should be in good order."

"Spell symbol! Right! I need to make one for Malachite when I see him. Yes, let's get everything ready. Rushing off won't help us, a few minutes of prep will go a long way. I'll do yours first, arm!"

With preparations complete we headed to the door, ready to head out of town and towards the direction the priest had pointed. It was time to get my revenge.

Chapter 10

“He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks.”

Hanz opened the door and had to stop themselves from running into someone on the other side, a long-haired woman in traveling clothes looking like she was having an argument with herself. She let out a squeak and stepped back. “Oh, uh, hi there!” she greeted us. I bent around Hanz to look at her one way while Snarly peeked around the other. “I guess we’re doing this now!”

“Doing what now, if I may ask?” Hanz asked. “We are in sort of a hurry.”

“The pitch. I mean, the offer. My request.”

“We’re not taking any jobs at the moment. If it can wait until we return, I can recommend an inn-”

She waved her hands. “No, no, I mean I heard about the, uh, trouble you had last night. I’d like to offer my services. As a mage. My services as a mage to help you out. That’s all.”

“Word traveth quickly,” Snarly decided.

“So it seems,” I agreed.

“I’m not really in charge of this mission,” Hanz admitted. “Orchid, why don’t you talk to the nice lady and decide if you want her help?”

“Fine!” *Why did you say ‘nice lady’ like that? We don’t have time for this! Hang on, Malachite.* We traded places so now I was awkwardly face to face with this person.

“I’m Liv,” she announced, by way of introduction. “Short for Alivia, but everyone calls me Liv.”

“I’m Orchid, and this is Hanz, and Snarly. You’re some kind of mercenary?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied with a nervous chuckle. “I was trained as a war caster, my parents were both mages? Now that the war is over I’m at a loose end. Heard about the attack and abduction, was it?”

“He couth be dead,” Snarly spoke up.

“He’s not dead,” I growled. “My husband has simply been captured. We are going to find him, bring him back, and destroy any cultists that stand in our way.” *And then keep destroying them until their cult is nothing but a memory, and the Gloom lifeform has no agents here to enact their evil plans. Break yourselves upon me, indeed. We’ll see who will break first.*

“If you thay tho.”

“Right, anyway,” Liv went on. “Figured I would get here early, before you got any other offers. My rates are pretty reasonable, I think?”

“Do you actually understand what you’re signing up for?” I asked her. “We are fighting *cultists*. They attacked our home last night and tried to kill us. They are *dangerous*. We’ve been killing them everywhere we find them. We will be killing more of them today to get to my husband.” *Which begs the question, where are they all coming from, exactly? The city should be abuzz with speculation if this many people had wandered off to go be cultists. It would have been noticed, yet, nothing. Why has the so called guild, that rumor would suggest swoops down upon anyone not charging for magic, done anything about these cultists using magic improperly?*

“I’m not against it,” she hedged. “I’ve killed before, in service to the kingdom during the war.”

Oh great, another soul that has already been lost. But then, what of my own after today? “I see. And you believe your skills will aid us in such an endeavor?”

“Sure do!”

I gave her a level stare, and she drooped a bit but stood her ground. “Allow me a moment to confer with my...” *Oh what the Hell.* “Family. I will give you my answer shortly.”

“I’ll wait right here!”

I closed the door in her face, and we moved back into the room. “What do you think?” I asked quietly, alert for the feeling of any magic being cast that might indicate she was watching or listening to us.

“I am quite suspicious,” began Hanz. “The timeliness of her arrival, in particular. As many cult members were killed last night, this may be a new tactic. Getting us to lower our guard while probing for weaknesses to exploit. She may have some means of bringing a group to bear on us, when we least expect it.”

“Agreed,” I nodded my head. *And we know the trouble we’ve had in the past with bears.* “We can’t let our guard down around her. We’ll see if she’s willing to go through with attacking Gloom cultists. Of course any spell she casts could just be illusion, and they’ll just play along with it. Be extra careful in that regard.”

“We can use the help though!” Snarly told us. “If it’s a real offer.”

“I agree. While last night showed Hanz can hold off a small army, that was simply men. We are going to the home of the Gloom, if we are to rescue Malachite. That will probably mean those elemental demons will be in force, complicating things. Your main weapon will be of little use against them.”

“And my ax!” they announced, doing a voice.

“This is no time for your weird references, Hanz!”

“Apologies. Mood lightening mode canceled.”

I looked between the two. “If you two have no objections, I suppose I don’t. Keep your enemies closer, as they say. Huh, I think I said that to Malachite once, on the road. Ah, those were the days. I miss Qwark. We knew you too short a time, little one.”

“Who?” they both asked.

I shook my head. “Maybe some other time. Let’s not keep ‘Liv’ waiting.”

We headed out again, Liv sitting on a chunk of stone that had been blown off the house. *Ah, my poor house. We’ll get you all fixed up soon.* She jumped up, looking expectantly at me.

“You can come,” I told her. “But I’ll want an idea of what you can do, once we’re on the road.”

“Yay! You got it, new boss!” She pumped a fist in the air. “Nailed the interview, good job me!”

You won’t be singing that tune when you have to explode your first cultist, methinks.

“How are we getting there?” Snarly asked.

“That’s a good question,” I replied. “One step at a time for now. Let’s head to the gate while I think about our options.”

Outside the gate and a little distance away from the city I summoned Besom and looked her over. “As much as I want to fly, and I could easily make her as big as Malachite is usually, would we be able to stay on her back? Making all my summons look like crystal is now coming back to bite me. But I don’t have time to remake the spell into something more appropriate that we could more easily hang onto. Two horses may be easier, I can manage that.” *Liv can ride with me, I suppose. I won’t subject her to Snarly. It’ll take five times as long but at least we’ll arrive in one piece.*

“Make her the right sith pleath,” Snarly told me, so I shrugged and cast the spell. She looked around from her new perspective, seeming pleased about the whole thing.

“I think I have enough rope,” he decided. “I can make uth a harneth and juth hold onto that.”

“She won’t fight you on it,” I told him. “If you’re going to trust such a harness, I will too.” *I have TK magic so...*

“I’ll see what I can do!” He got out his rope and started walking around her, trying to figure out the best way to proceed.

“Interesting spell,” remarked Liv.

"I'm more a utility mage," I told her. "I know a little bit of everything. I do okay for myself. Now, before we leave, I would like to say a brief prayer for our success. I trust no one has any issue with that?" I distinctly looked at Liv.

She gave me a thumbs up. "No problem at all!"

"Fine." I clasped my hands and prayed for the success of our mission, including that I wished Liv to come safely through this. *If she's not an enemy agent of some kind, that is. If she is, I'm going to be really sad to explode her head off her body with elemental needles after her sudden but inevitable betrayal. She seems like an okay person so I don't need that kind of stress in my life. If she isn't; it really isn't her fight. She's not going to save someone she even knows. This is just something to do, for her. A job. Much like me, not that long ago.*

With that done we got comfortable and took off, the rope holding as we zipped forward.

On the way I grilled Liv as best I could with the wind rushing past us, and learned she was a natural magician, and knew hardly any utility spells to speak of. Antidote, my augment spell, dismiss (which I scowled at), healing, and sending an object she was holding to someone else. Every other spell was either an elemental attack, or meant to slow down or contain groups of enemies. She really had focused on 'war' magic, and fighting groups in a large area. I wasn't exactly comfortable with the fact she knew dismiss, given how much it had been used against me recently, nor a spell to teleport something to someone. (A message that it was time to attack, for instance?) *But then, why tell me about the spell? She didn't have to. Even if I was running magic to tell lies, it isn't a lie (that the spell can detect) if you simply omit saying something. I guess she could be covering for me asking her directly "and that's every spell you know?" but that seems paranoid. On the other hand we should probably be more paranoid, some woman showing up out of nowhere and asking to come with us. So what do I know?*

The group landed and Besom vanished, leaving the ropes to slither to the ground, unsupported. Snarly started gathering them up as we looked around, and I did my divination spell a few times to get more of a fix on the location. It led us to the side of a mountain; an overgrown, rocky area but to no one's surprise, a weathered, wooden door was the only obstacle.

"Anything you want to prepare, do it now," I told everyone. Snarly got out his sword, Hanz activated the spell symbol, and Liv cast a spell on herself. For my part I put my emotions in the box, calming myself now that we were meters away from getting information about where my husband had been taken. I didn't get out my summons, figuring they would be taken out right away in any case. "Right. Leave one alive for interrogation." With that I cast thrust on the door, and the shards of it exploded into the room, not even holding together long enough to go a few centimeters. Hanz was first in, as they were now the most armored of us, and three figures turned from the strange, black hole in the air to face us. Two darkness demons flowed out of it, while the cultists shouted about being under attack.

Only three? And two demons? Did they not expect us to retaliate? Or is this all that's left in the area? We can hope. Have to take out those demons before they cover the area in darkness- as always.

I cast, empowering the spell and hitting it with six wind needles at once. Unfortunately, one of the cultists cast at the same time and hit me with a spell I recognized. Dazzle. The demon burned away as I jerked back, clutching my eyes.

Crap! "Got me, I'm falling back," I told them, taking a few steps back. I tried to squint but it was no use, my vision was swimming and couldn't focus. *So this is what the spell is like from the other end. 0/10, would not recommend.*

I heard the sounds of combat from the room, Snarly shouting, Hanz saying something about taking the other demon, and a clanging of some sort? The whole area went dark, the thing I was trying

to avoid in the first place, which didn't help my eyes any as now I was both stunned and blinded. Neat. It didn't last long though, the light coming back an instant later. *Is this going well or not? I can't tell.*

Shaking my head my vision was clear enough to tell I was surrounded by magical energy again, and threw myself to the side. The spell didn't track me quickly enough and I was unharmed, and my head was finally clear enough to rejoin the fight. The area around the portal seemed all kinds of messed up, both demons were gone, and there were only two cultists left. I didn't see the body of one, but another was trying to claw their way out of the ground. *Ah, she used her quicksand spell I guess.*

Liv and I both targeted the one cultist not trying to pull themselves out of the ground, so six needles hit him as well as a face full of what appeared to be acid. He screamed and dropped like a brick.

I guess that answers that question. Unless, again, the acid was an illusion and he died only from my needles.

Hanz was whacking the remaining one with their ax, but using the back part not the edge, and proving they had listened to my request to keep one alive.

It's like we know what we're doing! Yes! True professionalism shown for the newcomer. Report that back your Gloomish masters, if that's your game, so called Liv.

I noticed Snarly getting rope out again, and figured that side of things was taken care of, and looked around the room. There was a door to the left and right, and I figured any second now additional forces would pour through either one. *I better web it up or at least check it to see if it's locked.*

"Well done," I told Liv as I headed over there. "You survived first contact. Keep up that momentum and you'll be fine. Better check that other door though before- AAHHHH!" As I got close to the door spikes shot out of the floor and impaled both my feet, causing me to cry out in agony. "Why just me?" I demanded, falling over as blood spurted everywhere. "Why is it always spikes? Who traps their own stupid door?"

"Oh no!" Liv cried, in a totally convincing way. "Let me heal you right away!" She dragged me away from the spikes and lay me down, casting healing magic on my feet. Relief flooded through me, but she had to cast twice and I felt I still wasn't completely healed. *And I can't even tell how good a mage she is from that, given my own troubles with that spell. It might decide to heal a little, it might decide to heal a lot.*

"The hath problemth with thpikes," Snarly told her. "I thould update my bingo card."

"Not helping," I managed through gritted teeth. I waved Liv off. "Save your energy, I'll take it from here. Thank you though."

"Sure."

I healed myself the rest of the way while Snarly checked out the other door.

"Ith trapped too," he reported. "Want to do anything about it?"

"No," I replied as I got to my feet. The magical boots I was wearing were also slowly healing themselves, meaning they had been fabricated as well as imbued, which was a nice touch. Still, it made sense. Why go through the effort of making fireproof boots that would wear out? "I doubt any forces are going to come through a trapped door. But I should still check beyond..." I cast my clairvoyance spell, to look into the other rooms. Both had treasure chests in them, some rubble, and more demons. It didn't seem like they were on the verge of rushing in here, which was odd. The door was just another thin, wooden one, they must have heard us in here. "We can check that out later, when we get Malachite back," I decided. "No treasure will compare to him."

"Awww!" Liv cooed, clasping her hands. I didn't glare by force of will alone.

This is a battle hardened war mage?

We crowded around the remaining cultist, who stared defiantly up at us.

"Where is my husband?" I demanded.

"Oh, the draig? He has been sacrificed to the Gloom. There is nothing you can do for him."

And why exactly does the Gloom need sacrifices? “Forgive me for not thinking of you as the most reliable witness. If I go through that portal will I find him?”

“I’m sure you would be most welcome in that land!” he agreed, laughing. He started rocking back and forth, speaking in a language I didn’t know. I considered putting my spell on to understand him.

“Do you have some way to force the truth out of him?” Liv asked.

“No,” I admitted. “But that doesn’t matter. We go forward. If I have to tear whatever is beyond that portal to shreds myself, I will. They’ll beg me to take Malachite back, just to stop my rampage. Come on. Get him up, he’s going through first.”

“Sure you just don’t want to kill him?”

I regarded her. *Is she offering? Some illusion magic to spare his life, perhaps?* “We aren’t exactly taking him as a guide. But at the same time, we may need a way back. Sadly,” I sighed, “it’s been our experience that when a Gloom cultist disappoints their ‘master’ they’re simply killed remotely. Honestly I’m surprised he’s lived this long, tied up like this.”

“I would be honored to die by the will of the Gloom! All service to the master makes them stronger.”

“Whack him again, would you Hanz?”

“With pleasure,” they agreed, hefting the ax.

“I’ll shut up!”

The cultist was shoved into the portal, held there, and then yanked back out again. He seemed to suffer no ill effect, so the others looked to me.

“There could be anything beyond that gate,” I decided. “Let’s go in prepared.” I became light, putting the elemental body spell on myself.

“How many different types of spells do you know?” Liv asked, impressed as she tried to look through my chest.

“Never counted,” I lied. “Let’s go. You first, culty.”

“The Gloom will be your doom!”

“Uh huh. Being whacked again is still on the table...”

Stepping through we entered a strange space, open, but at the same time restricted. The ground was clear enough, but past a certain point the “walls” seemed to simply be a distortion leading to nothing. There was a white curtain of mist, which Hanz pointed to and said “boss room” for some reason, but we had bigger problems. Three demons were with us, two that looked like fire and one that resembled rocks.

“Here we go again,” Hanz announced, vanishing.

The Earth demon raised their arms, and the ground violently bucked under us. I could have sworn being made of light would protect me from such nuisances, but no, all three of us went down. No doubt to their great satisfaction. The fire one moved towards Liv, who gestured and cast, and the ground around the three demons was torn up and flung at them. They staggered, but didn’t go down.

Hold on, if that spell just tears up the ground and these things can’t be hurt by mundane means, how did they just get hurt? Either the ground itself is magical here, or again it’s just a trick to make us think she’s on our side. Ugh, I hate this having to second guess her. Not bothering to get up myself I again used my needles on the fire demon once again coming towards us. It jerked as six shots hit it, and burned away. The one next to it seemed angered by this and slammed fiery fists down upon me. I didn’t bother trying to get out of the way, it couldn’t hurt me. I refocused, casting on that one, but it didn’t go down.

Meanwhile Snarly hit the rock looking one with the sword, and it vanished, so we were down to just the one fire one. It shot fire at Liv, and I threw myself into it forgetting she had that magical armor

spell that probably would have taken it. I at least managed it, falling to the ground again after absorbing the blast. Liv yelled “destruction” but the demon seemed to resist it, but not the ax Hanz smashed through its head. It burned away after that.

“Everyone okay?” Liv asked. “Thanks for the save.”

“Just paying you back,” I muttered.

“No trouble here,” Hanz reported. “What a strange space we find ourselves in.” They grabbed up the cultist, who as yet was still alive, somehow. “Got our canary ready.”

“You won’t be so lucky a second time!”

“What part of that do you think was luck?”

“All of it!”

I had gotten up and was looking around. “Think that’s some kind of door?” I asked.

“Nothing else is door-like around here,” Liv agreed. “Let’s try it.”

“Shove him through,” I commanded. Hanz nodded and did so.

The next room was larger than the previous, with lava of all things bubbling away, as well as spikes. Six demons awaited us here, two pairs of earth, light, and fire types. They were ready for us, one of the light ones raising a hand and spearing my eyes with a bright beam. Again, you would think being *literally made of light* would protect one against such things. Not so much. I again had to stagger back, blinded and unable to act. *This is getting old real fast. I’m non-corporeal, how do these things keep affecting me?*

Again, the sounds of combat met my ears, as they still worked just fine. I wasn’t concerned about being injured, so I just tried to stay back and out of the way. When my vision cleared the battlefield had changed. The lava was gone, for one, and Snarly and Hanz were double teaming an earth demon, finishing it off. Liv put her cage spell across the entire field, blocking the remaining light and fire demons from reaching us, which didn’t seem to bother them as they started tossing fire and such at us. It hit something in the air and didn’t get close, I figured Liv must have used her barrier spell at some point as well. *Wait, she’s got her own armor, this barrier, and now that cage thing going? How much magic can she maintain at once and still be effective? I can’t maintain a single spell and feel like I can get anywhere with another! I guess that’s the power of the natural magician?*

I cast at the closer light one, dropping it and making it vanish. The other one stepped back to touch the two fire ones, who seemed to grow stronger. Hanz ran up to the cage, then turned back to us and was probably saying something. But of course, nothing can get through the shell especially sound, but Liv got the picture and dropped the spell. The two fire one shot at us, and both got through, but Liv did her extinguish spell on the flames and they vanished. I didn’t want the light one bolstering the fire one any more than it already had so I cast on that one next, taking it out. Liv did something while Hanz hit one fire one with the ax, and I glanced at Snarly to make sure he was okay. He was fine, standing over the cultist probably to make sure if they shot fire at him he would move and they would roast their own ally. *Guess he didn’t want to try his poison sword against fire demons. Seems reasonable.*

Liv tried her extinguish spell on the demon directly, but it seemed to do nothing. However, it must have spooked them both, who turned to run. I took out one, then the other who almost made it to the door.

“Still okay?” Liv asked.

“Fine here,” Snarly agreed.

“I am undamaged,” Hanz said. “Missed you in the beginning there, Orchid.”

“It seems to be pick the flower day,” I grumbled. “Or pick *on* the flower to be more specific. I got hit with a spell. Again.”

“You are unharmed?”

“Completely. I don’t even know how it affected me, to be honest. Glad you all handled it without me.”

“Still, you’re pretty lethal,” Liv praised. “You’ve only missed once that I’ve seen. Everything you cast against dies.”

“That’s the idea,” I agreed. “Door number 2?” I pointed.

“Let’s go,” Hanz agreed, grabbing the cultist.

“Wait, I want his energy,” Liv told us. “Do you mind if I drain him?”

“Drain him?” I asked, not understanding.

“I have a spell to take someone’s spiritual energy and add it to my own. As it fuels my magic, I don’t want to run out and be useless.”

“I guess?” I allowed.

“Great!” She stood there and cast the spell a few times, eventually knocking him out but still going.

“Uh, don’t take too much,” I finally said, stopping her. “Like I said, we may need him alive to get out of here. It’s a slim chance but I’d rather have an alive hostage than a dead one.” *Was that some kind of test, to see if we would stop her killing the guy? But I suppose even illusion magic would take her energies to cast, and this wouldn’t be harmful in the long term.*

“Right, sorry, I guess I did get carried away. Not really used to this, whoops!” She lightly bopped herself on the head and stuck out her tongue.

Cu-cute! I hastily looked away, hoping my cheeks weren’t getting red. *Malachite. Focus. Husband. Rescue.* A thought occurred to me. *I wonder if she could take anything from my summons? I’ll offer, after the next room. No idea how big this place is, we could be in for a long slog, but she should be fine at the moment having just ‘fed’ right?*

We made sure everything was in place and stepped through the door.

Chapter 11

“So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong, and strike at what is weak.”

This was the largest chamber yet, and we all looked around to see what we were facing in there. It seemed to be a magical image, shimmering in the air. A large figure, some kind of centauroid, holding a trident.

“You have come here for something,” the figure said to us, looking us over.

“I want my husband back,” I told said defiantly. “Return him to me and I’ll consider the matter closed.” *This matter. There’s still the matter of our house, and a cult that needs to be destroyed.*

“All things *are* possible,” they assured me. “Come further into my domain so we can speak properly. I will hear about this ‘husband’ of yours, and what price you may pay to gain my assistance.” The figure gestured, and the ground before it opened, showing a rough set of stairs leading down. When I looked back up the figure was gone.

“Wath that the Gloom?” Snarly asked. “Didn’t look like much. I could take them.” He mimed stabbing something.

“Given the figure’s speech pattern,” Hanz cautioned, “I do not think he has anything to do with the obduction. Note his phrasing- he did not lord it over you that he had Malachite and was willing to trade him. He genuinely seemed surprised to find us trespassing here.”

“I agree!” Liv said cheerfully.

People pleaser? “Very well,” I told everyone. “Stay on your guard. There could be anything down there.”

“And nothing good,” Snarly mused.

We descended the steps, I was still non-corporeal so I didn’t worry about falling, but Snarly tied a rope to himself and Hanz. Hanz genuinely thanked Snarly for his concern and hoped, if they fell, they wouldn’t be too heavy for him to pull up.

I think it’s more for his sake than yours... whatever.

The temperature soared as we descended, but we all made it safely and were soon standing before a large temple, made of a strange black stone. It was glassy, reflecting the light that was coming from my elemental body spell. Before the temple was the figure, solid now and looking down upon us haughtily. “Brave and foolish. You should serve me well. There is an artifact of great power located in a forgotten temple along the Serpent’s Kiss River. You can retrieve it for me, or you can die here and now.”

We all shared a look.

“We have come to discuss the release of my husband,” I reminded the creature. “You will return him to me, or die here and now.”

“Leth not be too hathy,” Snarly whispered to me.

“Ah yes, so you said. I know nothing of this ‘husband’ of yours. Why do you think he’s here?”

“We were attacked in our home last night,” I told him. “The place the attackers came from was the cave above us. We came seeking answers, to open our own gateway to the realm of the Gloom. That’s where he’s been taken.”

“The Gloom, eh? Odd sort of place to want to go. Say he was taken there- why would the Gloom let him live?”

“He wouldn’t be ‘allowed’ to live, he would escape, take shelter, and trust that I would move Heaven and earth to come to him. This is what I *will* do, if needed. He can take care of himself.” *Please, Malachite, take care of yourself!*

"You seem certain. Very well, then it seems we can do business. Bring me the artifact, and I may be able to find a way to send you to the realm of the Gloom."

I didn't have to think for long. There wasn't anything I had hoped for here; Writings about how to open my own portal. Other cultists that might do it for me. In fact there were only more questions: why were Gloom cultists messing around with a portal to wherever this was? Who was this demon looking thing and why couldn't he get the item he wanted himself? "What's this artifact, then?" I asked. "Where do we find it?"

"Not to worry, you'll know it when you see it. Now hurry, my servants! Victory is within my grasp, I will have it before the very day is through!" He waved his trident around and a darkness filled the space. When it was gone, I was surprised to find us all back outside again. *He somehow teleported us, but not himself, both across space and dimension at the same time? I mean I guess it's possible because he just did it, but that's not something he should have been able to do?*

"What shall we do with this one?" Hanz asked, pointing to the cultist that had also come with us. He was still unconscious or at least pretending.

I raised my hand to gesture and send a bunch of elemental needles into his face, exploding his head off his shoulders, but paused. I thought back to the "dream" I had with the angel of death, who told me that as long as I didn't revel in destruction, and killed those only looking to do harm, my soul would be safe. I lowered my hand, the man was helpless, cultist or not. "Leave him," I snarled. "It's more than he deserves."

"Thould I untie him?" Snarly asked.

"Do what you want," I told him, turning away. "I need to get our ride ready. This whole thing is taking way longer than I would like."

We flew to the river and set down, and I used my question spell to narrow down which way we should go, asking twice while pointing "If I go in this direction along the river will I find the artifact I seek?" When I got a "yes" answer we flew that way, looking out for any old structure that might be the place. We found a crumbling building without too much effort, and landed some distance away to make sure. My question magic again indicated the artifact we were after was inside, and I brought us over to the astral so we could hopefully get closer without being spotted.

"But be ready for them to see us, or for elementals guarding the place in astral, or weird darkness, or not being able to walk, or any number of other things that make our lives difficult," I reminded everyone. "This isn't the protection it was at the beginning of all this."

The other two nodded seriously, Liv more hesitantly, but we made our way forward. There were two men in robes, one looking bored and leaning against the doorframe, the other doing his job at least somewhat and looking around, trying to see if anything was approaching.

"I wish we could be helping with the ritual too," said the board looking guy suddenly, making us all jump and I almost put a bunch of wind needles into him. I put a hand on my chest to steady myself as the other guy scowled at him.

"All tasks are important, we are helping with the ritual even now. Do not think of our brethren as apart from us, as all parts must be played to ensure the success of our endeavor. If one part falls, we all fall."

Who even talks like that?

"Are we though?"

"We serve the Gloom by standing guard. We are the vanguard, the first line of defense against those that would seek to disrupt the will of our master. A position of honor!"

"Yeah, I get all that but..."

I tuned them out. "Come on, clearly they can't see us."

We headed past them into the main structure and just as the men had said, four were in the center chanting over a clay vessel, about the size of a skull. There was a table one of the cultists was behind, set with ritual implements and a book he was reading from, directing the other three. Along the walls were scenes representing the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water, and four separate doors at each corner were closed tight.

"Mana is flowing," Liv announced, looking around. "I can feel it moving, even here." She was pointing at one of the doors, but I was concentrating on keeping us here so I didn't feel anything.

"Let's see what we're dealing with through the doors," Hanz suggested, walking towards it. We followed, but something odd happened. There was a current of sorts we started to struggle through, seemingly some kind of force running in a straight line from the chamber beyond the door to the central area where the figures were. We simply could not move fast enough, being pushed back and away from the door when we tried to reach it. The way seemed perfectly clear, neither Liv or myself could explain it, but we were able to head to the side and around, as long as we stayed away from the direct path between the door and the center of the chamber. Here we saw a small room, two rocky looking figures just standing there, guarding a small altar. There was a strange looking sculpture on the altar, but getting close and looking it over it seemed the "altar" and the "sculpture" were actually the same thing. It wasn't something we could simply walk off with, the whole thing was the altar.

We went around to each room, literally, as each one had the same "current" running in a straight line from the altar to the center, and each room had an elemental theme that matched the picture on the wall. In total, there were 8 assorted elementals (2 in each room) plus the cultists. We had to assume once we started fighting in here the two outside would rush in, so now back in the central chamber and watching the ritual we discussed our options.

"I can put my barrier spell around us," Liv began. "That will allow us the time we need to deal with the cultists. The elementals will hear our commotion and come out, but I can make it big enough I feel they would barely get past the door, if that. We keep them out and have much less to deal with."

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea," I mused, looking around. "They might even vanish back to where they came from, if we take out the cultists doing the ritual."

"Shall we get into a good position, then?" Hanz asked.

I nodded.

"I'm on the leader!" Snarly announced.

"You'll have to go all the way around."

"I know!"

With all of us in position Liv cast her barrier spell and held it, waiting for me to drop us out of the astral. The other two nodded and I shouted a countdown to them. "Dropping on three. One. Two. *Three!*"

I dropped us out of astral and both Hanz and Snarly tried to lunge forward. *Of course*, they bounced off a barrier put up by the cultists because what sort of cultist leaves the house without protection? They looked helplessly to me as the four reacted, shouting something that of course we couldn't hear.

"Suppress the barrier, take the full time, I'll support you!" I shouted to Liv. She started casting and I joined her. Our combined spell hit the barrier- and bounced off.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I grumbled. "The both of us, and we couldn't- aarg!"

The leader had cast a spell, and lights swam in my vision as I was dazzled, again. From what I could tell we all had been, making me think *That's impossible. He split his attention four different ways and got all of us? How good is this guy? Anyone that good at casting spells wouldn't need to be a cultist, they would be a high ranking mage in the guild. Where are all these people coming from? The entire city only has two official magic shops, how many mana users from this cult have we killed? Half the continents worth?*

Why he cast that in particular was a mystery, as this was still a stalemate situation. We would recover, and everyone would still be in the same position. They couldn't get to us to attack, and we couldn't get to them to attack. But as my vision cleared I saw him casting another spell, and suddenly I found myself before the two surprised cultists outside.

"Er, hello?" I tried. *Again, an impossible feat. There is no teleportation spell that works at a distance like that. What is it with people teleporting me around all of a sudden?*

"Where did you come-"

"Just grab her!"

"Oh no you don't!" I told them. "Needles!" Elemental energy tore into the one on the right, the one slightly closer to me and the more alert looking one. He was torn to pieces, blood and otherwise exploding out of him from all sides.

The other froze, unsure if he should attack or run, but chose to pull a knife from under his robes. "You'll pay for that!" he assured me.

"No, I won't," I assured him back, and cast again. He too went down in a bloody pile, the knife sailing out of his hand and skidding along the ground. "You picked the wrong side," I told them, bending down to touch the ground. "If your 'master' the Gloom hasn't claimed your souls somehow, please do be tortured for all eternity. Or come back as a demon so I can kill you again. Your choice. Hygiene." The mess vanished from the ground around me so I could step over the bodies without getting my boots all bloody. "I don't have time to reanimate you and send you down there to help my family, but know I was thinking about it." I made my way down to see how the others were doing. When I entered the room Snarly was struggling with a rope, trying to pull something in the other chamber. It seemed our barrier was down as well for some reason, as the door was open. The others were busy with elemental demons, as once the barrier was down clearly they started their attack, so I had to decide what to do. *Is he trying to topple the altar, maybe? Sure, we can do that.* I cast my enlargement spell on him, causing him to stumble a little but take up the slack in the rope again and start pulling with more force. Something came loose, the rope went flying, and now I could tell the current of mana was cut off from that direction. Unfortunately, it seemed to increase from the other three directions.

"One down, thanth!" he shouted to me, scampering towards the second door across the way.

"Balk!" I cast, not bothering to reply. Hanz was fighting a fire elemental so I figured I would help them out, which worked out as Liv used her extinguishing spell on it, causing it to vanish.

"The barrier hasn't fallen!" she called to me.

I assume she means the cultist barrier, as clearly I can see ours did.

"Got it," I called. "I'll be support for now, we'll take care of that when we're out of danger." *Maintaining the size change on Snarly will make me less effective. Best to stick to instant, low grade spells for now.* I cast an empowering spell on Hanz, who hit the earth demon that was currently trying to encase the enlarged Snarly with rocks. They hit, magic adding to their strike but the elemental stayed up. I kept empowering Snarly and Hanz as they took care of the two earth elementals, finally taking both out. The one wasn't dead, as it hadn't vanished yet but wasn't moving, and Snarly picked it up and hurled it through the door at the altar. Both smashed to pieces, and the job was half done.

Snarly now turned his attention to the barrier, attempting to smash it down by force, where magic had failed. "Leth thich!" he cried.

Switch? I looked around in confusion.

"If you can help, that would be great," Hanz told me, walking past towards the next door. It seemed sealed up with ice, apparently this was the ice room, and the demons inside had taken a more defensive stance here. One of the demons flowed out of the door, apparently unimpeded by the ice.

"I'll take the demon, you two focus on the door," I told them. *As I don't have any fire magic I can attack with. Start a campfire, yes, but not shoot at them.*

Both nodded.

While they got busy casting fire spells and lasering the door, I cast my elemental needles on the ice demon, shattering it. *I really was not using this spell correctly in the past, I thought to myself. At least I have this cult to thank for making me reconsider how to use it. Still, the point was to give them a chance to surrender. But then they came for me and mine, attacking our very home. Now it's war, and they've all lost that opportunity. Clearly this cult is a disease that must be eradicated completely from the land.*

Another ice elemental emerged from the remains of the ice plug, and the two jumped back. I certainly didn't want to show off and take this one out too, so I simply empowered Hanz, who was raising their ax, with my elemental strike spell. It went off, while the elemental took a swipe in at Liv which bounced off her armor, *good thing she had that going- wait she had that going too the whole time?* And the ice elemental was smashed to pieces by Hanz. "Good teamwork," they praised, raising their other arm to laser the door again.

"It's unprotected, I'll start on the next door!" Liv announced, heading in that direction.

The altar, she means. Right, only two elementals per chamber. Good plan.

Hanz finished lasering through the ice enough to get the door open and went inside, ax held high. I was keeping an eye on the cultists, Snarly had given up trying to pound the barrier down (it couldn't be poisoned after all) and was now trying to dig his way *under* it, maybe to try flipping it over? I had no idea if that would work, but the cultists seemed to think he was onto something. They no longer seemed to be chanting, instead looking around nervously and saying something. One started casting, the mana swirling around him, so clearly this wasn't an attack on us. I was right, a second later he vanished.

With them retreating and not able to attack Snarly, or they would have already, I turned my attention to the last door. Hanz by that time had smashed the altar in the previous room and both were now ready to throw the final door open. I empowered Hanz's ax again, and they jerked the door open, allowing Liv to throw fire through it. An air elemental came swirling out, shooting a blast of air at the both of them. Hanz drew back but Liv didn't manage it, getting hit square in the chest and going flying. She landed in a crumpled heap several meters back.

"Tend to her, I've got this one," Hanz told me, as I was trying to decide which way to go. I nodded and lunged for Liv, casting my basic healing spell as quickly as I could. *The 'better' one is just way too unpredictable and difficult. This is the best way.*

Hanz got the best of the air elemental, chopping the head of the thing off, and another cultist vanished. With the guards gone Hanz took care of the last altar as Snarly literally started shaking them inside their own barrier. Everything flew off the table, the one cultist that was left (*when did the third one leave? I must have missed it*) was seemingly triumphant, throwing his hands in the air as the barrier vanished. The glow around the vessel faded out, and the cultist was standing there laughing. "We won!" he announced. "You failed! Look around! Now you'll see!"

"I don't thee anything?" Snarly told him, grabbing him.

"Wait, why didn't it work?" he asked, clearly confused. "It should have worked! No fair!"

"We get that a lot," Hanz told him. "Now," they hefted the ax menacingly. "Are you going to behave yourself?"

"Should have worked," he muttered. "Completed the ritual, the vessel was impowered. I don't understand what happened."

"What did I miss?" Liv asked, her eyes fluttering open.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked. "We've won, don't move too much yet."

"Thought the armor would take it. Maybe I should dodge and count on the armor as a last resort. Ow."

"Where does it hurt?"

"Here..."

With Liv patched up and having taken the cultist's energy, we were ready to bring the vessel to the demon.

"Are we leaving thith guy too?" Snarly asked, now back to his regular size. He was unconscious from the energy drain, and I really, really wanted to just kill him then and there.

"No. Let's bring him to the guard. Like it or not this cult is their problem too, and they need all the information they can get," I decided. "It's going to cost us time, but I don't think we should hand this thing over just yet. I'm sure-" I looked at Hanz, "most of us are getting wiped out from all this running around. Even your magic can't compensate for that, Liv."

She nodded.

"We may need to fight this demon thing, if they don't give us what they promised. Or if they do, whatever is on the other side of the door they open. Malachite is either safe or... dead... by this point. He'll be hungry, but that's a small price to pay. We'll leave in the morning so we can be fresh and ready to face it."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Liv agreed. "Let's get back."

"I'll conjure up our ride," I agreed. "You don't mind making that harness again, right Snarly?"

"If it thavth me walking all the way back!" he agreed, getting out his rope. "But first, treather!" He pointed to a chest shoved up against the wall and went over to it. He did not get spiked through the feet, so that was a nice change, but the chest was actually empty.

Well, at least we'll have a box to put the clay pot in?

Chapter 12

“Begin by seizing something which your opponent holds dear; then he will be amenable to your will.”

After a bit of discussion with the gate guards over the fate of the cultist, and dropping him off at the guard station, we headed home. It was getting dark and so hard to see, but it seemed like work on the house was proceeding. The front looked better, and Hanz must have stayed behind to supervise because there they were, sitting on the front step. I did a double take and looked to my left, where Hanz was standing next to me.

“Hanz?” asked the Hanz by the door, getting up.

“Yes?” answered Hanz.

“Good, I’ve caught you in time!”

My eyes narrowed and I raised a hand to cast my needle spell if this remnant should turn hostile.

“What do you mean by caught me?” Hanz asked.

“Does the name Kreager mean anything to you?” they asked, somewhat ignoring the question.

“No. Should it?”

“At least some of us are safe, that’s good.”

“Look, you’re not making much sense...”

“Sorry.” They paused. “I think I’m more damaged than I thought. My logic processor is skipping certain decision trees in favor of others and- I’m Lars, I have something for you.” They indicated a bag at their side, and I noticed they were missing an arm.

“I don’t recall ordering anything,” Hanz told them. “And you don’t look like an Amazon delivery van. Can you summarize your intent here?”

A what?

“Certainly! We’re from the same line, as you can see,” they indicated themselves in a general way, and they really did look similar to Hanz. “One of our line is hunting the others down. I came to warn you, and give you something. I can’t use it anymore.” They indicated their missing arm. “I felt I should pass it on to one of our line. I heard one was here in Gloomhaven, so I figured why not you? I’ve heard tales of your exploits and figure it may be of use to you.”

“Do you mind if I invite them inside?” they asked us, and Snarly rushed to open the door.

“I don’t think they’re a threat,” I decided, looking them over. Unless they were faking it, they were battle damaged for sure: looking beat up, moving slowly, and what remnant would become a cult member? It wasn’t likely. “Let’s see if we can fix them up and get the full story.”

“You are too kind,” they told us, nodding as Snarly threw the door open for them.

We worked on their repair, Hanz and I, as they told the full story. It seemed this Kreager had spontaneously acquired the ability to do magic, a rarity in remnants but not unheard of, but the transition was not a gentle one. They somewhat went mad, and decided they should be the only one of their line to have that power. Thus, they had made it their mission to hunt down and eliminate all others of the line, which of course included Hanz and Lars here. “I narrowly escaped, playing dead,” they explained.

“I approve!” Snarly announced.

“Er, yes, thank you. The parts of my weapon I could salvage are in that bag, there. You are welcome to them.” Hanz gently dumped the bag out on the table. A collection of broken pieces tumbled out, intact enough to let me recognize the weapon Hanz used.

I need to remember to put my spell symbol back on them, they’ve used it now. Well, in the morning.

“I suppose it’s nice to have spares,” they agreed.

"Ah, I haven't been clear." They fished out a slightly bluish crystal and held it up for us to see. "While I myself have not been gifted magic, my weapon of late has seemed most peculiar. Others in the know have claimed to sense a faint trace of magic upon the lens, spotted when I entered larger towns who check for that sort of thing upon entry. It was determined that the lens would allow my weapon to harm that which normally cannot be harmed by purely physical means. Such as demons and the like. This is what I wish to pass on to you. Such a thing should not be lost, just because my weapon was destroyed."

Yes, I can't use the repair spell to replace his arm because it's gone. We've done what we can here, but without parts, there's only so much magic can do.

"That would indeed be a great boon," Hanz agreed, looking it over.

"Lemme thee! Lemme thee!" Snarly demanded, making grabby hands. Hanz handed it over and he looked at it in the light.

"Can you actually use it?" I asked.

They nodded. "The installation should be fairly straightforward. We are assembly line construction, not bespoke, so most of our pieces could be exchanged with little difficulty. I have the technical skills required, I can perform the swap while you organic beings rest in the night."

"I wondered about that, how *do* you stand living with so many organics?" Lars asked.

"It's quite troublesome at times," Hanz informed them.

They both chuckled electronically.

"Yes, yes, laugh it up you two," I told them, rolling my eyes. "Early start tomorrow, don't spend all night talking with your new friend. Or do, I'm not your bored mother."

"You mean motherboard," Lars corrected. "But a valiant attempt, I give it six out of ten."

Come on, that was at least at seven. "Don't break it, Snarly."

"I wathnt going to!" He handed it back.

"Before you retire, and not that I doubt you, Lars, but perhaps?" They held it out to me. I took it and looked it over myself. There was an odd sense of magic about it, none on Lars themselves, and I said as much. "It should do what he claims, all right."

"Very well. I shall begin the replacement. Thank you."

"Sure. Good luck, Lars. If we can do anything else for you, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you very much! I'm just glad my warning came in time."

Yes, a remnant with weaponry like Hanz has, plus my ability to do magic on the side. That went crazy and wants all their siblings dead. Should be a fun time.

We headed out early the next morning to go see the demon, Liv once again joining up with us. I brought a sack of rations and water skins for Malachite should we get him back soon. *We will get him back soon. I'm sure of it.*

Flying back to the cultist lair we again traversed the staircase and headed downwards, finding the demon standing there once again.

"Excellent!" they exclaimed, taking the vessel. "Fully intact, as you promised. With this we are ready to make an assault against your realm. Come! Help me fight against the humans and I will set you at my right hand, where you will earn many riches. What say you?"

"While a tempting offer," I lied, "I am more interested in your promise to me. Please keep your word and work to send us to the realm of the Gloom. As you gave your word to do so. Now please."

"Ah yes, you are chasing some dead lover or other, are you not?"

"My *husband*, who is *not* dead, yes. Thank you for remembering. I'm sure this assault of yours can wait a moment, as we did have a deal, did we not?"

"Humm, that we did. Getting you there would be difficult until my goal is fulfilled. Gaining you passage to the Gloom requires me to have control of Gloomhaven."

But why? There's nothing special about that place, is there? It's just nearby. It's a bit of land. I should have known better than to trust some sort of demon. I can't force the issue either way. Attacking him does no good. Nor will I fight my own town- is he crazy. “Well, as we actually live in Gloomhaven, it seems we are at a bit of an impasse. We have no interest in ruling there, the place is a dump and with all due respect, I highly doubt your rule will improve the place. Also, if you take over and we are ‘at your right hand’ that basically means we just get all the boring jobs like paperwork and making sure city maintenance is done. No one over thinks about that sort of thing but it still has to be done, no matter who is in charge. But I won’t stand in your way if that’s what you want. We will simply look elsewhere and thank you for your consideration. As I’m sure you have many battle plans and troops to rally, we won’t take up any more of your time.”

Liv looked at me strangely, like “are we really just giving the thing to him?” but he considered me carefully.

“You have done me a service,” he finally said, looking at the vessel. “And you simply wish to depart? Very well, I will allow it. Should you not find another way to rescue your no doubt long expired husband, come and seek me out after my victory. I will still remember that you made it possible and reward you.”

He's. Not. Dead. “That is most generous!” I agreed, putting on a big smile like I truly wished him well. “Good luck with the conquest!”

“He probably is dead,” Snarly agreed.

I glared and he shrugged.

The demon turned and went into the temple, calling for his generals or whatever, and we started the long climb back up the stairs.

“So now what?” Hanz asked.

“Back to square one,” I growled. “You would think, with all these new doors opening to elemental planes and all the otherworldly beings we’ve helped *someone* could open a door to where all these cultists are getting orders from. A simple door, held open for five seconds. Is that so much to ask? What does he need the town for? Just do what you said you would do, for crying out loud. Weren’t we always told demons had to keep their word?”

“He was careful to say he may be able to help,” Hanz reminded me. “You have to be careful with them.”

“Are we going to let him take over the place?” Liv asked hesitantly.

“Of course not,” I sighed. “Let’s fly back there and warn them. Honestly, this whole thing was such a waste of time...”

“And so you overheard this demon claiming they were about to attack Gloomhaven?” the captain of the guard asked us.

“That is correct, captain Orzellon,” Hanz told him, because it was true. We *had* overheard the demon saying this. Now was this because we were standing right in front of him, having gifted him the very means of beginning said attack? Yes, yes it was. Had we told the captain of the guard this? No, no we had not. While we might not be the smartest group of adventurers to ever claim the title, we weren’t stupid. Thankfully he had found the guard captain with relative ease, and our reputation was such he agreed to meet with us right away. “The demon was shouting orders left and right, and we hurried back here at once to make sure the town knew about it.”

“I have no reason to doubt you,” the draig said. “But surely such a force would be days away, or hours at the-”

“Something’s coming!” shouted one of the guards at the walls, pointing. “A large force approaches!”

“Or not,” he sighed, deflating. “Well, thanks anyway.”

He turned and started shouting orders to his troops, and the doors were closed and bolted. A tense few minutes passed as the small army of demons came closer and closer. Finally they were within shouting distance, and we could see the large demon in back, holding the vessel. He shouted up to the walls.

“The time of demons is upon you once again! Relinquish your city to me and you may let live. The only ones I wish to kill are those foolish enough to oppose me!”

When was it ever the time of demons? Dragons, maybe...

“Then you shall kill all of us!” Orzellon shouted, gesturing to his left. There was a twang, and a ballista shot sailed through the air, striking the demon true in the chest. He staggered back.

“It seems that must be so!” he cried back, ripping the bolt out. He started to change, his form shifting into something else. It had tall horns, a crown, a red dragon’s tail, one pair of bird’s wings and one pair of dragon’s wings.

“Astaroth,” Hanz told us. “Demon of laziness. Strange to see him here.”

“Now do you see?” the demon roared. “Now you will pay!”

“No, I don’t think so,” Liv decided, having been looking over the side of the wall as if trying to gauge the distance. She sighted the demon and cast a spell, throwing an arm out. “Shatter!”

“What?” Astaroth managed, as the clay vessel in his hand shattered and was destroyed. There was a point of darkness inside, which suddenly expanded to show a scene from another world. I could just see a strange, tall, tower in the distance through the darkness and then as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone. Along with most of the demonic army that had been there a second ago. There was a moment of silence as everyone tried to work out what was going on, and the demons decided without their leader, they weren’t quite as brave as they had thought. With a cry they scattered, flying or running every which way.

“That’s the power of a war-caster,” Liv declared smugly. “You have to strike at just the right time, and in just the right way. That’s how you win battles.”

“Don’t let any get away!” shouted the captain, taking to the air. “Follow me, everyone!” Those that could fly also took to the air and gave chase, meanwhile a cry went up for Snarly, savior of the city.

“But it was me who saved the city?” Liv protested. “I did it. Stop saying Snarly, it’s Liv! Liv saved the city! Me! Oh they’re not listening!”

“Tho now what?” a smug Snarly asked when we got back home.

“No idea!” I told him, throwing up my hands. “We’re completely out of leads.” *Maybe if Malachite hadn’t killed that one cultist by dropping him, he might still be alive and we could ask him. But then again, given how they self-destruct when no longer useful even that’s doubtful.*

“There is one other avenue,” Hanz suggested with a bit of hesitation. “Hale. They did help us find Jekserah though in an unconventional way as I recall. They also mentioned they were doing research into other planes, that’s what the orb was for that we retrieved for them. It is my theory that the orb was a bit of matter from another plane, the plane of ice. Or perhaps simply of ‘cold’ it is hard to tell. That is how it was so cold, and why the ice elementals were guarding it. A little piece of home, to be specific. I believe they may be studying how to open doorways to other planes, and with something that *came* from elsewhere it would be easier to lock onto that other plane. We can see what their research has revealed and ask if they are familiar with the Gloom reality. If so perhaps they can send us there.”

“At least they aren’t a demon,” I agreed. “Even if they send us for more roots or whatever, they will probably try to keep their word instead of blowing us off. Sure, why not? Don’t have anything to lose at this point.”

“To sweeten the deal, I propose we trade them the scepter we retrieved in our quest to determine how to free the trapped being from that one temple. We didn’t end up using it? If you recall? So it’s a

rather dangerous thing to have hanging around, so let's let it be Hale's problem. It might catch their interest enough to be worth aiding us."

I did recall the scepter, it was guarded by those weird plants, and the voice reached us there and said not to bring it. And Hanz was correct, it was useless to us as we didn't have any interest in sacrificing ourselves to lock away an other worldly being. "Sure, I'll go get it from the 'safe.'"

We rang the bell next to Hale's door and Hanz requested if they could do most of the talking, as they had dealt with Hale before. "The fact is, they are rather absent minded and difficult to deal with. I know you are in a hurry and do not want your need for haste to cloud your judgement. I can keep them on track and will not be as exasperated trying to keep their focus."

"Uh, sure..."

The door opened and we went inside, Hale appearing from the upper level and looking us over.

"Didn't you already get me the ice orb?" they asked. "I thought I helped you already?"

"We are here to request further aid," Hanz told them, setting the scepter down on the dusty bar. "We wonder if you might be interested in this. In exchange we would like information and transportation, if you can manage it, to the realm of the Gloom."

"Oh, interesting construction, perhaps this will keep my attention for a bit. And what did you say you wanted? Transportation? This isn't the docks."

"No, we wish to do got the place the Gloom resides. To rescue someone that was possibly taken there. Though possibly disintegrated as well, but it will be nice to know one way or the other."

"Don't you start," I grumbled to them.

"How were they taken there? Not an easy place to get to from here, I'm sure."

"A Gloom cultist used a spell during an attack on our house. He vanished, an apparent 'sacrifice to the Gloom' so they said."

"So wouldn't just asking one of them to take you there be easier?"

"They're all dead," I told them. "Or I would. The last ones we tracked down were no help. We don't know any of their other lairs. And they tend to die rather suddenly if they get captured."

"I see. Very well! I will look into the matter. Return tomorrow." And they, along with the scepter, were gone.

"Like, thunrith tomorrow or after breakfast?" Snarly shouted. "Tomorrow can mean anything?"

There was no reply.

"More delay?" I almost shrieked. "I swear, I will personally murder every person that caused me delay in finding my husband if I learn we were too late because of all these delays. Don't think I won't. Come back tomorrow, I don't believe it." I stormed out.

The others went out, as there were celebrations being had for the routing of the demon army that threatened the town earlier, but I stayed at home, praying for Malachite's safety and being miserable I hadn't thought of any other way to more swiftly retrieve him. *Honestly, I need some magical item that can whisk him to my side if he's gone for too long. Something. Try to hold on, my love. I'm doing everything I can to reach you, I promise!*

Chapter 13

“So long as victory can be attained, stupid haste is preferable to clever dilatoriness.”

Bright and early the next morning we heard a knock on our door as we were getting ready to leave and see what Hale had to say. Wondering if they had sought us out because something had excited them Snarly opened the door, but it was just two guardsmen standing there. He invited them in for breakfast, which we didn't have time for, but they thankfully claimed they couldn't stay.

“We are simply here by order of the captain to bring you a reward for your service in defense of the town,” the one said. He handed over a small sack of coins, which Snarly immediately passed to Liv, who had spent the night there so we didn't have to wait for her to arrive.

“Oh, and we still owe you your fee,” I told her, as she looked the contents of the bag over. “Don't think I've forgotten. You're keeping track of the days you're working for us, right?”

She nodded.

“Good. You'll get it.”

“Also this,” the other soldier said, leaning a tower shield against the wall.

“Oh, I thought you were just carrying it,” Hanz exclaimed. “This is part of the reward?”

“Some magic shield, yes. Best we could do. Sorry it isn't more, a lot of people could have died in that attack and you stopped it like that. Snarly is the best!”

“Liv is the best!” she pleaded. “I did it! How many times did I say that at the tavern last night?”

“Dothenth,” Snarly agreed. “I did my betht to tell them it wath you.”

“I know you did,” she told him sadly. “I know.”

“Well, have a good day,” the guards said, and took their leave.

“It appears to cast a spell called shell,” Hanz read off the note that was attached to the shield.

“I can cast that spell,” Liv reminded us. “Boring.”

“And somewhat useless?” I agreed, looking it up and down. I doubted I could lift it without falling over. Hanz needed both hands to shoot and hold the ax, and Snarly... the less said the better. *Maybe Malachite will want it? But no, his sword is two handed. What a useless object.*

“Apparently it can be used a total of 36 times,” they continued. “If these marks on the back are any indication, it has been used 16 already. I will allow you the pleasure of calculating the remaining uses on your own.”

So doubly useless. Great. Why 36, by the way? It wouldn't have been that much effort to just make it last forever. Why go through the trouble and stop at such a weird number? I guess it could be used if reinforcements were on their way, but for a soldier to activate it, now they're out of the fight too. That's why I never bothered learning defensive magic like that. Better to simply attack. “You're all heart, Hanz,” I told them. “We can see about selling it or whatever later. Or you can put it in your collection, Snarly. You were, after all, the hero of the day.”

Liv gave me a look of utter betrayal. “And to think I liked you!”

“You'll like me again when I count out your coins. Come on, let's go see Hale.”

She wiggled her head back and forth as if to consider and say “you're not wrong” and we headed out the door.

“You've finally arrived, we don't have all day!” Hale chided us at the door. They came out and closed it behind them as we got closer.

“I did try to athk what time you wanted uth here?” Snarly reminded them.

“Never mind that. Where are we going again?”

“You're going to open a portal to the realm of the Gloom,” Hanz said patiently. “Do you need more space? Is that why we are leaving your lab?”

"What? Oh no, I can't do that!" they protested. "Not yet, anyway. Very dangerous thing to do. Attract a lot of attention."

"Then where are we going?" Hanz asked, as they had kept walking and now we were trailing along behind them.

"Didn't I tell you already? What a bother! There's an artifact that can make it easier. We're going to go get it."

"Do we need money?" I asked. "We can stop back to the house and get some if it's something we can purchase."

"Oh no, the owner is long dead. Buried with it, at least that's the rumor. We're going to check it out. Most have forgotten the location. Sort of a forgotten crypt, if you can believe it."

"Why be buried with it?" Snarly asked.

"Oh, keep it out of the wrong hands I suppose," Hale replied. "Don't you want to be buried with all of your possessions?"

No, I want to learn magic to return me to my youth when I'm about middle aged in another 300 years, thank you very much. I don't want to be buried at all.

We made it to the crypt, following Hale's directions, and to the surprise of no one, two men in robes were standing at the entrance. "Cultists," Hale told us, hanging back. "Go deal with them and we can get inside."

"Gloom cultists?" Liv wondered, craning her neck and shading her eyes.

"No, different type," I decided. "Note the absence of the red sash. That's a blue one, they're different."

"Ah, got it. Oh, so predictable!"

I looked where she was looking, and a couple of skeletons were emerging from the door. I rolled my eyes as she threw fire at one. I couldn't have her showing me up, so I dropped one of the cultists with wind needles, tearing them to pieces with a gesture. The other got a horrified look on their face as we were still just calmly approaching, as if about to ask directions to the nearest town. Hanz had ignited their plasma sword and stepped up to block the other skeleton, chopping into them.

Wouldn't the ax be better? It is an undead creature, after all. Oh well.

Snarly gave a battle cry and charged the other cultist, who froze and flattened themselves against the wall. I shrugged and empowered him with a magical strike, thankfully the spell accepted his claws as "a weapon" as it had to be cast on a weapon, specifically. He clawed the cultist's face off, seeming surprised he had done so well. *My magic has felt particularly strong lately. Perhaps I'm getting close to claiming the title of arch-mage for myself?*

Liv passed me, entering the place and I hurried to follow, stepping over the two corpses as Snarly bent to see what they had on them.

Honestly, what is with this area and cultists? Just get out of our way and let me rescue my husband already. It's like there are more cultists around here than citizens. And this is some other cult now? How many people are giving up their souls- their very chance at seeing Heaven- around here? Is it something in the water that shrinks their brains or something?

We entered the next chamber, Hale right on our heels, and she opened the next door without incident.

Oh sure, no spike trap when she goes to open a door. I would have had to dodge the ceiling collapsing or something.

"What a bother," they said, and Liv and I looked over there as Hanz entered the room. "Take care of it, will you?"

We looked past them into the room, and it seemed there were a couple of ghosts in there, turning to face us.

“Uh, one second?” I requested, doing a quick “Detect Enemies” spell. *Ghosts aren’t necessarily hostile to us, they just hang around and-* “Yes, they’re hostile.” *Darn it! And there’s more enemies that way and that way. Why can’t it ever be just a peaceful trip to the market and that’ll be 20 copper coins please! Yes sir here you are! Now our problem is solved, hurray!*

Liv cast a spell, electricity leaping from her hand and zapping the one ghost, making it vanish. The second one was undaunted, and followed, so I cast my wind spell and it was torn to pieces. I did the same on the next one too, and no more came into the room. *Sorry, souls. There wasn’t much else we could do...*

“This is going quite well,” Liv remarked.

“You had to say it, didn’t you?”

We headed into the room as Snarly was done looting the bodies, and there were more skeletons in there, too. I dazzled them, just to see if it would work, and it seemed to, and Liv blasted one with electricity. Hanz shot some kind of grappling hook out of their arm and swung up and over, about to come down and chop one of the skeletons in half, so I quickly empowered them as they fell, but they only hit the skeleton’s arm. I empowered them again for their next strike, which did the job, as Liv finished off the other with fire.

“Watch out, there’s more enemies,” I cautioned Hale as they went to open the next door.

“I’m sure you’ll take care of them,” they insisted, giving the door a yank. A cultist surrounded by four skeletons blinked at us in surprise.

What were they doing in here? There’s no furniture, it’s just a big mostly empty chamber. Were they just standing there? In the middle of the room? Did they not hear the commotion in this room and were rushing to help their fellow cultist? It’s a weird place to guard, honestly.

He raised his hands like he was about to cast a spell, so I gestured and wind needles sprang up around him, slicing into him and tearing him apart. Hanz and Snarly rushed past me, towards the skeletons so Liv and I hung back beyond the doorframe as good little mages should. Liv started casting a spell and a magical glow surrounded one of the skeletons, so I figured this wouldn’t take long. I empowered Snarly twice, disappointed my efforts were not as effective this time, as it took him two hits with his sword to destroy the skeleton. He took a minor wound for his trouble, or at least I hoped it was a minor wound as he was acting like it was the end for him.

Liv finished her spell, the head of one skeleton bursting apart into a fine powder, while Hanz successfully chopped up their skeleton, leaving only one. Snarly pulled out his black knife, making Liv cry “I don’t think that’s such a good idea!” making him look back at her in confusion. I empowered Hanz’s next strike instead of Snarly as clearly something was going on, and they stepped forward, ignoring the blows of the skeleton against their metal body and smashed it to pieces.

“Clear!” they announced, looking around dramatically.

“Whath up?” Snarly asked.

“Not sure if you want to use an energy draining effect against an undead,” Liv told him. “It might heal the thing, or have the opposite effect and drain your energy into it. I forget which.”

“Oh, okay,” they agreed.

Ah, Liv has that energy draining spell, right. Clearly they would know. Actually, that brings up a good point. “Let me know if you get low on energy,” I told her.

“Are you offering to donate some?” she teased.

“In a way,” I agreed, not rising to the bait. “We can try having you drain one of my summoned creatures. They should appear in perfect health every time, so that should include their spiritual energy as well. If it’s compatible with you, in a pinch you can refresh yourself that way.”

“We can try that!” she agreed with a smile. “Thanks for thinking of me!”

“Of course!”

“Let’s get Snarly patched up,” she suggested. “You want to take the armor while I focus on him?”

"Humm?" We both looked over to him, and he realized he was in the spotlight.

"Oh, ow, ow, it hurth tho much!" he agreed, clutching his side again. "The pain! What a world."

"Uh huh."

We got him healed up and his armor repaired while Hanz checked over the cultist. We barely got through when the door started shuddering and a booming echoed through the chamber like someone strong was banging on the other side. Hanz and Snarly got into positions on either side of it, while Liv and I hung back.

Nice to have another long-range fighter, I couldn't help but think. Someone that doesn't just go charging into the fray without regard for their own safety. Love ya dear, but you do put yourself in danger sometimes.

The door was smashed off its hinges and burst inward, three figures beyond the doorframe. Liv had been holding onto something and Hanz had the ax ready, so both attacked the first figure to come through. They looked kinda dead, to be honest, not like zombie dead but there was something off about them. They followed up the ax strike with another, as the figure hadn't gone down even after the initial blows. He took the head of the thing clean off, so at least they were not somehow resistant to edged weapons or anything like that. Snarly kicked the head into the room and someone yelled "hey!" a second later.

I empowered Snarly's weapon again as he had put the knife away, and the next figure through the door took a swing at Hanz. They bent out of the way and the man's fist hit the doorframe, cracking it.

Yikes, that's not someone you want to get hit by. No wonder they don't use weapons.

I focused on my core, drawing ambient mana through it, as Snarly cartwheeled through the air to stab the thing in the neck. Liv took a chunk out of it with her destruction spell, and I cast my wind needles, also tearing into it. But the figure didn't fall. *What is this guy? He's still moving after all that?*

"Fall back, you can't handle them!" cried a voice from the other room.

Says you? I once again put as much extra mana as I could draw into my core through the next spell, another series of needles slamming into the guy and finally dropping him.

Hanz rushed into the room, followed by Snarly, who ganged up on the final figure. They were doing well at keeping his attention focused between them, helped by my "Dazzle!" spell which staggered them. Liv finished him off with more destruction magic to the head, making the body stagger around a second but finally fall.

Looking around it was another fairly empty chamber with one door, which Snarly went to work on because he said it was trapped.

"More delays?" Hale grumbled, coming in and looking around.

"You could help too," Liv told them, "if you're in that much of a hurry. There must be something you can do, aren't you a spellcaster?"

Hale seemingly ignored her, taking a great interest in the walls of the place.

"Uh huh."

"We can open the door now," Snarly announced, stepping back. "Trap dithabled!"

"Do you hear something?" Hanz asked, cocking their head to the side.

Suddenly a stream of elemental energy smashed through the door, catching Snarly by surprise and throwing him back, badly hurt. Hanz protected their face and twisted out of the way, seeming to avoid the worst of it. Thankfully, Liv and I were far enough away from the blast we didn't have to worry, and Hale was nowhere to be seen. With the choice of trying to get to Snarly and heal him or taking out whoever had been able to do that, I chose attack and peeked through the doorframe. Three figures were in the room, which despite the torches I could see seemed unusually dark, and I could see two cultists and a dwarf in burial clothes. It was the dwarf lowering his hand so I targeted him, as Hanz

raised theirs and fired a blast from their newly augmented weapon system. He didn't go down, but seemed badly hurt.

Magic hit me from the cultist on the left, dazzling and making me think *Not Again!* But yet at the same time be thankful it wasn't something more dangerous. But then I was pretty sure something more dangerous was happening, as through the flickering lights in my vision I saw the others hastily trying to take the cultists down. There was a burst of heat in the room but nothing more, while fire poured out of the room with the cultists.

Ah, backfired the spell? I thought to myself. *Happens to the best of us. Well, so much for the artifact we were here to find. If it was in that room it's gone now.*

When I came to my senses everyone was looking in the opposite direction, back where we had come from, and to my surprise the dwarf was now over there, rather than in the room with the cultists. Liv looked rather pale, having done an "extinguish" spell for some reason, but I turned my attention to the other room.

"Stonebreaker!" yelled Hale. "What are you doing?"

"Hello, Hale," he replied. "I apologize, but I don't have a choice in the matter."

"Then neither do we," Hanz told him, blasting him. He went down.

"What a pity, I won't get to talk to him again," Hale sighed. "Well, let's do what we came here for."

"Snarly is badly hurt," Liv told me, rushing over to his unmoving form. "Let's hurry!"

"Right!" I agreed, and joined her. Between us we closed his wounds up, a large number of wounds making me wonder how he hasn't died, but Liv was maintaining something on him I felt that was helping. As he was finally and shakily getting up Hanz dumped an armful of golden statues and other trinkets onto the floor next to us.

"This should help you feel better," they announced. "Look it over, it's everything from that room."

"Did we find-" I started to ask, but noticed Hale looking over what appeared to be a censor of some kind. "I take it we did."

"Yes, this is the artifact," they agreed. "I'll get started with it right away. I'll come find you when I'm done. Good day." They vanished.

Well, at least they seem to be taking it seriously. But you could have brought us all back with you.

We made it back to town in the usual way, ourselves, and secured the treasure we had collected from the cultists. Snarly's spirits were indeed raised by the prospect of selling the items, which he estimated were worth almost 15 suns altogether. I didn't want to be out when Hale returned, and figured we could take care of that when Malachite was back with us. Though I did briefly leave to deliver a cartload of my own wares to the merchant I had a deal with, as it was the scheduled date to collect my earnings and deliver more stock. Over the next three days I made, and blew apart, a lot of stones in the back yard for practice. (And no small amount of stress relief, I might add) The others were rather surprised I didn't rush off to bother Hale the next day, but I explained I did my question spell every few hours to ask "Is Hale continuing to work on the issue of opening a pathway to the gloom?" and always got back a "Yes."

"So as long as they keep working on it, I'm satisfied," I told the others. "While I do chafe at the delay, right now this is our only hope. Bothering them now will only slow them down. If I am ever answered "no" and they don't show up at our doorstep- or in our kitchen knowing them- soon after we'll all head down to the broken bone or wherever they're squatting currently and get some answers."

"Fair enough," Hanz agreed. "Make me some rocks as well, I will use minimal power and work on my own aim during this downtime."

“I can even float them around for you,” I told them. “Make it extra challenging.”
“A fair exercise,” they agreed. “I accept.”

Chapter 14

“Order or disorder depends on organization; courage or cowardice on circumstances; strength or weakness on dispositions.”

It was late at night when Hanz roused me from my fitful slumber, saying Hale had arrived and wanted to talk to us. It was after midnight, so I wearily made my way down to the kitchen where they had spread a map out on the table.

“They’ve been talking non-stop,” they explained. “Maybe you’ll be able to make some sense out of it.”

“I hope so?”

“Ah, there you are,” Hale greeted me. “Come look at this. I have used the artifact, the dimensional censor as it’s called, to pinpoint three possible locations where a thinness in the dimensional walls may be found. You will need to investigate the locations and see which is the most suitable. There is one under the water here,” they pointed. “One here in the forest, and one here in the mountains.”

“You can’t just open some kind of portal? The Gloom cultists seem to do it all the time,” I protested.

“That may be a simple request to open the way from the other side,” they explained. “So no, I cannot. I can only allow you to travel upon the road that is already there.”

“I see. Is this going to be another one of those ‘you’ll know it when you see it’ sort of deals? What exactly are we looking for?”

“I believe it will be obvious, yes. It will be a site of corruption. Once you discover the thinness please contact me, and I will join you shortly. Then I will be able to ascertain if the weakness leads in the right direction, and open it such that you may step through and rescue your cousin.”

“Husband,” I corrected.

“Whatever.”

“Heth dead now,” Snarly piped up.

I glared at him, but turned back to Hale. “I suppose that’s possible.” *Liv I think said she knows a spell to contact someone. Good for getting battlefield orders I think is the way she put it. Yes, that should be possible, we won’t have to go all the way back.* “Corruption. That should be obvious, yes.”

“Quite. Oh, one thing of note about the Dagger Forest, and where you need to go. I would recommend some kind of guide. I believe a group of elves live nearby, perhaps they can assist you? You are on your own for the other two sites.”

“Thank you for making this possible,” I told them gratefully.

“Of course, of course,” they brushed this off. “It furthers my own studies, no need to thank me. We’ll be in touch soon I expect, see you then.” They vanished.

“So what are we thinking?” Hanz asked, looking the map over. “I can survive the depths, but perhaps one of the other sites to begin?”

“The forest site is probably the easiest to check on,” I agreed. “In the morning we’ll take Liv and head out there. I could probably track her down with magic, but we’ve waited this long. I’m not heading to the forest in the middle of the night to try and convince a bunch of elves to help us. Best do that when the sun is up.”

“Then I’m going back to bed,” Snarly announced. “Thee you in the morning.”

I headed back to bed myself, and in the morning, we flew out to the Dagger Forest, keeping an eye out for any settlements. We passed a rather large group of orcs on the move, which was troubling, but not really our problem at the moment. They were a nuisance, and too large a group to deal with, *even if we wanted to for some reason*, but too small to be a credible threat to the town. *Swooping down*

and simply murdering a group of orcs minding their own business doesn't sit right with me anyway. They are troublemakers, and far outside polite society, but they could be trying to reform themselves for all I know. Best to leave them alone and head to the elves. We've wasted enough time!

We followed the directions provided by my question spell to the site of the settlement, or in this case, what was left of it. The place was torn apart and abandoned.

"Because of course it is," I announced, throwing my hands up in frustration. "Why should I have thought otherwise?"

"What do we think happened here?" Snarly asked, looking under a small wooden shape that could have been a table at one time before it was smashed.

"Clearly some kind of attack," Hanz guessed. "Given the nature of the damage to the structures, they were set ablaze. One of the advantages to living in a stone house, as we do. Harder to catch on fire, where these houses were primarily wood and so would have caught and burned easily. I do see the remains of some elves, but not enough to account for a village of this size. It is my conclusion that the village was attacked several days ago, and most of the inhabitants rounded up and taken elsewhere. We must follow if we are to hope to recover them and procure our guide."

"I suppose I can ask the question spell to help pinpoint where they went," I agreed.

"Let us simply look around first," they decided. "It may be obvious, as such a large force to overwhelm this number of elves, and then force those elves to march on foot to their destination, will leave tracks."

"I leave that to you."

"I'll thniff around," Snarly announced.

"No looting!" I called to him. "I don't care how much help we provide freeing them, if they see you wearing their sacred necklace or whatever."

"I know, I know!"

After a few moments of looking around, Hanz announced they were 85% certain the raiding party had been orcs, which tracked as they did seem to be in the area. I looked around the place. *Conventional wisdom says orcs will eventually rise from the blood of their victims, that's why the elves here were left and not eaten, I expect. I should do something about that.* I considered, touching the ground. *I can clean something, usually it's just something I hold or a person, but in theory my skill in Venus magic would allow a single casting to cover a wide area. Enough to cover this settlement, at least. I wonder... But it would only take a second to try it and see.* "Be cleansed," I intoned, touching the ground and willing my spell out as far as it would go. The magic rushed out, wiping away the stains of the blood on the grass as far as I could see. *That should do it. It worked! Cleaning magic is the best magic there is. And you can't convince me otherwise. No orcs should arise here, now. If the grass was cleaned, any blood soaked into the soil would also be gone, and so the orc 'babies' would have nothing to latch on to and arise.*

"I have a trail," Hanz announced, getting our attention. "We must travel in this direction!" They pointed.

"So let's go," Liv agreed.

I wasn't going to walk, so I summoned up Athame to ride, and we followed Hanz's directions to a clearing where they reported the forest was being clearcut to provide wood to build war machines. They had done some scouting while invisible, giving us some idea of how many elves and orcs we were dealing with.

Are they planning on attacking the town? Why make such efforts otherwise. What is it about my town that causes others to try and take it over all the time? Go build your own if you're that set on living in houses or whatever. Leave us alone.

"The orcs are mainly watching the elves work," they reported. "So, while there is no set perimeter, we would have to be careful not to be seen by any orc wandering around. There are some tents, I did not go inside yet as that was a much greater risk, and I felt your magic of astral travel may be more useful than my physical scouting. I did not see any magic in use, so we have a definite advantage there."

"So let's come up with a plan!" I agreed. "I can see a few things we could do, slowly making them vanish or trying to get them all at once. Depending on how spread out they are. Let's take a look around ourselves and see what we're dealing with." I held out my hand so the others could grab hold, and we headed into the astral to look around and see what we wanted to do about all this.

Our reconnaissance from the astral plane went unnoticed, no orcs crying out in surprise having seen us or alarms being tripped or anything like that. We stuck together, just in case, and noticed a few things about the camp. There were three large "pens" in the clearing, hastily constructed, but probably good enough to keep the elves in line during the time the orcs were eating or sleeping. That was a good sign, and one we could possibly exploit to make sure they were out of harm's way before any attack happened.

"We aren't thinking of attacking them, though, are we?" I asked, nervously looking around. There seemed to be a lot of orcs in this camp, and yes I was good- maybe a little too good- even I could be easily overwhelmed by dozens of fighters rushing me.

"They are evil," Hanz reminded me. "And they do not have souls. We would be doing the world a favor. Especially as they seem to be acting under orders to build these siege engines. This is not the usual behavior of orcs at all."

"Don't forget, this is somewhat my specialty," Liv spoke up. "Large scale assaults using area effect magic. I'll be a great help."

"You're not the only one with that sort of magic," I told her, recalling what happened back at the Khi'teen village. I shuddered. *But like they said, they don't have souls and are a menace to the countryside.*

"Okay?"

"Let's go talk plath," Snarly told us. "No thenth thanding around here."

"Fine."

Some distance away from the camp we stepped back down from the astral and went over what we wanted to do.

"So how do we use what magic we know to get the elves out of danger without putting ourselves in too much danger?" Liv asked.

"Tricky," I admitted, grabbing a copy of my spellbook (never carry your original spellbook) out of my pack. "I suppose if there could be some kind of distraction I could quickly bring the elves into the astral. It might take two trips per pen, even I can only get twelve or thirteen if I'm lucky. Depends on how well I can manipulate ambient mana at the time."

"I could learn the spell," Liv offered, peeking over my book. "Then we could do two pens at once. And I can get way more people than you can. No offense."

"I don't deny your way of spellcasting can be more effective than mine, for a time," I allowed. "But I can keep it up all day."

"That's what he said. Proved him wrong though."

"What did he keep up?" Snarly asked curiously.

"Ask me when you're older," Liv hastily shut up down. "Much, much older."

"Foowy."

I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, that leaves the third pen. They aren’t that far apart. By the time we got to the third location the orcs, having been alerted, may take them hostage or simply start killing them to keep them from being rescued. We need to account for that.”

“We could defend them!” Snarly announced.

“True,” I agreed with a nod. “When I drop out of the astral the first time, if you were both were in position, you could rally the elves there and protect them while we got the first two groups to safety.”

“Could you not utilize your runic magic?” Hanz asked, tapping the symbol on their arm that allowed them unlimited power to shoot their beam weapon with. “Make three of these on separate stones? Then simply distribute them?”

“It would have to be six,” I decided after a moment. “To make sure everyone would be covered. But that’s a possibility.”

“Again, not with me!” Liv bragged.

I scratched my head. *Ah, still not used to having hair again!* “I don’t think it works that way?” I paged through my book and read over the notes for the Spell Symbol spell. I shook my head sadly. “It won’t work. Only I can cast the spell that goes into the Symbol. It’s my connection to the mana that allows it to happen in the first place.”

“I wonder if that’s strictly true,” Liv questioned, tilting her head to the side. “It’s not done often, but a spell can be ‘handed off’ to another, if you will. Could you start the spell, hand it off to me, and then I complete the second part myself?”

I blinked at her. “I’m not familiar with such a technique!” I admitted. “Though, I’ve mainly traveled alone or with a non-magic user so I would have no need for such a method. Is it difficult to do? We don’t have a lot of time to master any new skills.”

“I can coach you through it,” she assured me. “You just have to give me the spell, I’ll initiate the transfer. Just don’t fight me on it.”

“We can give it a try with maybe the light spell?” I decided hesitantly. “Just to get a feel for it?”

She nodded energetically and held out a hand. “Let’s do it.”

Proving it was indeed possible to cast a spell and have someone else maintain it, we got to work. Liv looked the Dimension Step spell over a few minutes, announcing she was sure it was engraved on her mana core properly. I resisted the urge to scowl at her, it simply wasn’t fair that I had to study the most basic of spells for hours to be sure I had engraved them properly onto my core, where natural magicians could do so in minutes. *But again, I can cast spells without limit in a single day, so which one really is the superior method? Huh, wonder if I should charge her the guild rate for letting her learn the spell? On the one hand I have followed the rules up to this point, and selling spells is the accepted method way to do things. On the other, screw the guild. Where were they when my husband was taken? Where are they now, to help punish these cultists for abusing magic as they do? Oh right, nowhere. If they somehow found out about it, and came to talk to me about it, I would give them a piece of my mind.* I then took the rocks Snarly had dug up from the nearby forest and, one by one, cast the Spell Symbol spell onto each. After I did one and handed the spell (and the rock) over to Liv, she converted her natural spirit energy into mana and empowered the Dimension Step spell. We succeeded without issue all three times, and once it was dark and the elves were all in the pens, put the next part of our plan into action. Liv picked three elves she had seen in the pens basically at random, then cast a spell to speak to them all.

“Don’t react, but if you can hear me, you’re a minute or two away from freedom. Don’t react I said! That’s better. Now, I’m about to send you a rock with a symbol on it. Everyone in the pen grab hands, and hold the rock up, saying ‘escape.’ That will trigger it. You’ll be sent to the astral plane, I assume you know what that is, and can walk out of the camp. We’ll be there to meet you. Right, better

maintain the connection, we need to do this all at once so the orcs don't get wise. I'll send each pen a rock, and then you can all leave at once. Here comes the first rock." She picked up the first, making it vanish, then repeated that for the second and third. "Okay, I can't see you. I'll give you a count of thirty to get everyone close and explain what's about to happen." She started counting to thirty. Meanwhile, I headed back to the astral with Hanz and Snarly to meet them. "I hope you're ready. Okay, on three, right? One. Two. Three." The three groups of elves become more "solid" as they entered the astral, and we waved them over to where we were. They were all too eager to get away from the camp.

"We will help you fight," one of the elves hastily told us. "We cannot let the destruction of our village go unanswered."

"You're unarmed?" Hanz reminded them.

"I'm not giving you my thuff," Snarly announced, gripping his sword and dagger tightly.

"We will have to rush the camp and take what weapons we find," he decided.

"That may not be necessary," I told them. "But I thank you for the offer. I'll be right back, you can finish off what's left."

"What's left?"

I nodded and started casting.

"Wait, aren't I coming too?" Liv protested.

"I'm wearing special boots that protect me," I told her. "Believe me, you're safer here. I'll be back in a minute." I finished my invisibility spell, fading from view, and headed into the camp. There seemed to be some kind of meeting, a figure in the distance was shouting orders to the assembled orcs that were crowded around him, and I knew I was only going to get one chance at this. Sighting a campfire near the crowd I dropped the invisibility spell, making sure I was behind a tent at least, and gathered ambient mana. Casting, I set fire to the burning log I could see which exploded outward, engulfing half the camp in flames and setting most of the orcs on fire. The boots protected me, the flames harmlessly washing over me as the fireball lit up the night sky. They screamed and thrashed around, though the figure in the center that had been giving the orders hardly looked hurt at all. Until his head erupted in fire, very clearly a shot from Hanz's weapon.

"You followed me?" I asked, looking around but not seeing anything. The figure dropped to the ground; he wouldn't be giving anyone orders again.

"From a distance," they agreed, speaking from nearby somewhere. Clearly they were getting closer, as their voice got louder now that the danger had passed. "I had some idea what you intended, after all. I wanted to make sure anything that survived your assault didn't make too much trouble for you. Let us have our new friends finish the job, as they have indicated a desire to have their revenge."

"Sure, go get them."

A moment later, the elven force surged forward, surprised to find so little resistance as they grabbed up weapons and finished off the orcs lucky enough to have been spared the initial blast.

"That was some fireball," Liv remarked, coming up to stand next to me. "You can really do some damage when you want to."

"I suppose that's- Darn it!" I shouted, balling up my hands into fists.

"What? What is it?" She looked around nervously.

"I forgot to dedicate the explosion to my husband!"

Chapter 15

"If he sends reinforcements everywhere, he will everywhere be weak."

The elves, having finished off their captors, ransacked the place while grumbling about everything being on fire. Which, to be fair, was true. Parts of the nearby forest *were* on fire, an unfortunate side effect of how I had gone about *saving their lives*. Liv stepped up, extinguishing flames with magic as Snarly and Hanz looked around for anything else of value that survived. Without a word of thanks, the majority of the elves headed into the trees, not even bothering to look back and give a nod of gratitude. I stood with my hands on my hips, scowling. *I mean I don't need them to prostrate themselves at my feet, of course, but a 'hey thanks' wouldn't go amiss, now would it? Ah, now what?* An elf carrying an orcish sword was heading over to us and held up a hand in greeting.

"My apologies for my brethren's lack of gratitude," he began. "We can be fairly standoffish- especially with those not of our kind- one reason we live as we do in the forest. Still, even our recent tragedy shouldn't make us completely forget manners. You may call me Red Thorn. Thank you, on behalf of all of us. May I know the names of our rescuers?"

"I'm Orchid, this is Mal- this is Liv. To my left are Snarly-"

"Highya!"

"And this is Hanz."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," Red Thorn told us with a slight bow. "Your arrival was certainly timely, praise be to the Lord, Almighty."

"Praise be," I echoed.

"And your magic is strong. I couldn't believe my eyes when the entire camp was engulfed in flames. What are such powerful mages doing so deep in the forest, if you don't mind my asking? While I thank the Lord for the timely rescue, I am sure there is a more mundane explanation for your presence here."

"There is," I agreed. "The rescue of my husband. He has been taken by an elemental force from beyond our world-"

"Heth dead now!" Snarly reminded me.

I cleared my throat. "*Rescue*, of my *husband*. The elemental force of Gloom has many worshipers in the area, and we were attacked recently. During that attack he was spirited away to parts unknown. We hope to find our way to his prison and free him. To do this, we must discover a weakness in the fabric of reality, that will allow us to traverse realms and enter the elemental plane of Gloom. We hoped to ask a resident of the forest if any sites of corruption were known that might fit the bill. We have reason to believe one may be nearby."

Red Thorn shook his head sadly. "To turn away from the face of Our Lord, king of kings, creator and Father of us all... what madness infects the mind of such people? I will never understand it. Still, you are fortunate, as I believe I can lead you to such a site within the forest."

"That's wonderful!" I gushed. "Is it far?"

"Not far," he decided after a moment's thought. "But I fear for my kind, scattered about the forest. I doubt these orcs worked alone, especially given our own numbers in this part of the woods. I'm sure more 'laborers' to serve the 'orc cause' are always in high demand. Would you mind if we checked in with another community on the way? We must warn or save them, as well."

I bristled at the delay, but needed to keep this elf happy to have even a chance at rescuing Malachite. "Of course," I agreed through somewhat clenched teeth. "As long as it's on the way."

"It is. Come. We have little to offer in the way of hospitality after the attack on our community, but at least we can offer you all a place to spend the night. Return with us, please, and we will leave at first light tomorrow."

I looked to the others, I didn't want to speak for them, and they all shrugged or indicated in general it was fine, so I accepted.

"Splendid. Please, come this way."

"Did you lose anyone in the attack?" Liv asked as we walked.

Red Thorn sighed. "I did. My children. We have so few, they were truly a blessing from the Lord. And now they have gone to their true home, in Heaven. It is a small comfort, they should have had a long and fulfilling life, here, in the material plane."

"My condolences," she told him. We all murmured the same.

"Thank you. Ah, what's this?"

An elf was leaning against a tree, seemingly waiting for us. He held a pair of crude sandals in his hand, as far away from his body as he could. "Thought you might come this way. Here." He tossed them down in front of us. "The leader was wearing them. They're magical but I want nothing to do with anything worn by an orc. They're yours." He turned and continued on towards the village. Casting a quick hygiene spell on both I felt them out, and indeed they were magical in some way; a sun spell had been put into them, to be exact. "I'll figure out what they do later," I told Liv. "I already have magical footwear and these two," I indicated Hanz and Snarly, "don't wear shoes. So they'll probably go to you. If you want them, anyway." *Like, you're not carrying around that enormous and somewhat useless shield, so you do have a lot of sense to stay away from dubious magic items.*

"We can figure that out later."

"Right." I shoved them in my pack, and we continued on. *How does an orc get magic items? Stole it, probably.*

The elves got to work performing last rites over the bodies of their fallen, and Red Thorn was relieved to hear I had cleansed the area before leaving so no orcs arose here. We assisted as long as we could, sadly I had a lot of stone manipulation magic but not any wood manipulation magic. *Apart from my normal feminine wiles that is.* But I could still lift things, repair branches, furniture, pottery, that sort of thing. I dropped into a makeshift bed at the end of a long night, the elves still singing the Lord's praises and praying for the safe delivery of the elven souls.

I awoke to a breakfast of forest fare the next day. Before we headed out, I put my spell of skill enhancement on myself and concentrated on the sandals we had recovered. They had a healing spell in them for sure, the low grade one that healed only a minor wound at most, but a most curious activation condition. At first, I couldn't believe what I was feeling, but I checked and checked it, and yes, there was no mistake. I came out of the meditation to find the others around me, waiting for me to be done. I handed them to Liv.

"They're yours," I told her, "but it's the strangest thing... They will heal you endlessly, the spell won't run out," *unlike every other magical item we've found or been given, so useless*, "but these are somewhat useless in a different way. The activation is not taking a *single* step, or even *two* steps. You have to move a whole ten meters to heal a minor wound. Ten meters!" I shook my head. "What was the creator thinking?"

"Did someone mention the Creator?" a passing elf asked, perking up. "Praise God!"

"The creator of this magical item," I clarified to her. "Our Most Holy Father is not under discussion at this time."

"Ah, my apologies." She walked on.

"What was I saying?"

"Someone created literal 'walk it off' sandals?" Hanz asked. "A strange choice, to be sure."

"Exactly. They could have made the spell be activated any number of ways. They went through all the expense and time of making these, only to have them activate by walking ten meters? It just doesn't make sense. If you're wounded, you don't want to walk around... generally."

"It could," Snarly protested. "If that orc that wore them had them made by an *unwilling* mage."

"What do you mean?" Liv asked.

"Perhapth they abducted a mage and forthed them to make magical thandes for them. Tho the mage maketh the item they athed for, rather than thomthing all that utheful."

"Ah!" She brightened, getting it. "The orc asks for sandals that heal him 'as he walks.' These sandals do that. *Technically* giving the orc exactly what he asked for, rather than what he meant to ask for. A sort of middle finger magical item, while giving the orc no room to complain because he got the item he requested." She considered, humming.

He nodded.

"An interesting theory," I agreed. "Anyway, that's what they do. Use them, sell them, whatever. They're yours."

"Thanks!"

"Are you ready to go?" Red Thorn asked, walking up.

"Let me refresh any spell symbols that got used up last night," I told him. "Then we can go."

"The site we are headed towards is the Shadow Weald," Red Thorn told us as we headed away from the elf community. "At least, that's what we call it. If there is a place that can be said to be a site of corruption it is that one. Checking on the elf community will not take us far out of our way."

"Very well," I agreed. "Lead on."

"We are nearing the clearing that was used for the settlement," Red Thorn reported some time later. "We should see it before long."

"Should we expect more orth?" Snarly asked.

Red Thorn sighed. "We have always known of the orcs in this part of the forest, but they have never been a problem until recently. We take our self-imposed charge of protecting this place very seriously. In fact, we probably would have attacked *you* on sight, had we not already been captured and put to work. But now there are many more orcs than there ever were. It's worrisome. They are bolder, attacking us more often. Our only course of action now is to exterminate them all. Hold!" He held up a hand and looked ahead. We stopped and looked as he pointed, then reached around to grab an arrow from his quiver.

"Orcs, ahead of us," Liv announced, shading her eyes.

"Indeed," Red Thorn agreed. "It seems we are just in time. If I have your support?"

"Of course," I answered, thinking that was a silly question. *If I said no now, he'll either charge in there and get killed, leaving us with no guide, or head back to get more elves, leaving us with no guide. The only answer we can give is to keep him safe and help him liberate this settlement.*

"Come then." He crept forward. We didn't have far to go before several orcs on watch came into view, backed up by a war wolf the size of a horse. *Great.*

Snarly melted into the trees to the left of us as they saw us and shouted, but Liv hissed "Wait!" She cast, the area between us lighting up with a magical circle. The orcs looked around stupidly, not understanding what was going on, and when the circle cleared found themselves starting to sink into the ground. They raised a cry of alarm and others turned away from the elves they were "tending to" and reoriented on us. But they saw their buddies thrashing around trying to get out of the area pulling them down, and even they were not stupid enough to simply charge us. So we pressed the attack: Hanz, Liv, and myself choosing our targets as Red Thron did his best with his bow and arrow. I couldn't fault the elf for using what tools he had available to him, but our party was a bit better equipped for this sort of thing. I quickly dropped one of the war wolves while Liv blasted the head off another with a single spell, Hanz choosing an orc to shoot with their beam weapon. By that time several more orcs had appeared, trying to get their friends out of the quicksand area. As they were pulled out, I cast a spell on

one of their weapons, yanking it away from the orc and tossing it to the nearby elf. *May as well arm him, let him get some of his own revenge- and he's missed catching it. Wonderful. Well, I tried, buddy.*

Shaking my head I cast my wind needles on an orc as Red Thorn missed his target, then quickly switched to defense as an orc threw a spear at the elf I had tried to arm. It bounced off the air, wobbling away, as the orc looked to his now empty hands, probably realizing he was now unarmed. Two more near the quicksand had their weapons so I cast a quick Fumble spell, hoping the weapons would land there and sink, but no such luck. At least they were unarmed for the moment.

Hanz finished off another orc, and I realized the wolf that had been in the quicksand area was free and about to pounce on an elf, so I deflected that as well. I had enough time to hit it with needles before I needed to protect the elf again, and Liv blasted it with electricity, finishing it off. Snarly emerged from the underbrush with an elf in tow, shouting "an orc is following me!"

We'll deal with that when the time comes. I needed to get that elf out of danger, so simply lifted them up with a quick telekinesis spell, bringing them over to our side and away from danger. Hanz meanwhile shot the final orc we could see, which went down. One wolf was left, trying to flee the area, and I pelted it with needles but didn't manage to bring it down. It vanished out of sight behind some trees.

"We must press forward!" Red Thorn shouted. "How may I do that safely?"

"I'll drop the spell," Liv told him, and the ground firmed up again. She turned her attention to me. "Don't suppose you could get out one of those constructs? I'm going to need to replenish my reserves soon!"

"Sure," I told her, thinking *poor little natural mages. Powerful in short bursts, but no stamina.* I cast, getting out Besom, the bird, figuring it could be useful in more ways than one. *Should have had them both out at the start. No cultists around here throwing the dismiss spell around every other second. Stupid cultists.*

As I transferred the spell to my necklace and Liv turned to start draining energy from the summon, the orc that Snarly had been referring to popped out of the wooded area and looked around for a target. Naturally the quicksand was gone, so they were fine. It took a swipe at Red Thorn, who was closest, but he managed to lean away from it. Hanz shot him and Snarly leapt at him with a cry, staggering him but not killing him. Figuring he could use a little help I quickly empowered his weapon with elemental magic, and the next time he swung he took the orc's head clean off. With that we had run out of targets in the clearing, and we hurried forward. There was a passageway through the trees to the left and ahead of us, but I rushed to the elves that were slowly picking themselves up off the ground.

"Are any of you hurt?" I asked, looking them over.

They indicated they were not, so I directed them back the way we had come from, then had to turn and defend against another wolf and orc that emerged from the passageway. Red Thorn, Liv, Hanz, Besom, and myself all unloaded on both, Liv getting the last hit in on the wolf and causing its head to explode like the other one. The other orc went down a second later.

"I really wish you all had been around when my settlement was attacked," Red Thorn lamented. "I did not expect you all to be such warriors, looks can truly be deceiving sometimes." He headed to the next passageway through the trees, stopping to peer around a tree trunk. "More orcs!" he hissed.

"Right, I've had about enough of this," Liv announced. "Snarly, that elf you rescued, was that the only one in that area?"

"Thure was!" Snarly agreed with a nod.

"Fine. Cover me." She got close, casting, and the entire area filled with a magic circle. When it cleared the orcs and wolves that were waiting to ambush us screamed and thrashed, but the area was too big. There was nowhere to go and no one to pull them out. They got dragged under the ground and went silent. "See? I can be effective too."

“Area effect magic can be nice, I’ll admit it. As long as who you’re casting on is nice enough to bunch up and has no hostages.”

“I have two hostages!” a voice cried out from a passageway ahead of us, across the clearing. “Let me go or I’ll kill them both!”

I indicated that direction with a knowing look, and Liv rolled her eyes. She went over and drained Besom again, making sure she could still contribute as this clearly wasn’t over yet.

“Hey, is that orc telling the truth?” Hanz shouted to the elves we had left behind. They were still nearby, trying to stay away from the action. “Two more elves not accounted for?”

“Green Leaf and Pink Sky are indeed still missing,” one of the elves agreed. “It’s possible they are over there.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Hey, when did you get- never mind. Come here.” Red Thorn was bleeding in two places, so I quickly cast a healing spell on him, as Liv did the same.

“Ah, thank you,” he said gratefully. “But what are we going to do?”

I considered a moment. “Now that you know the spell,” I said to Liv, “we can do a two person variant on something I used to have to do alone. Hold one casting of the spell, drop the first, and let the second activate.”

“What spell?” she asked, confused.

“Dimension step. We’ll get around them that way, rescue the two elves, and the orcs won’t have their hostages anymore.”

“Oh, I can do that!”

Once on the astral plane we headed forward, and indeed there were two elves, being watched over by three orcs. There was enough space behind them that we could slip in, and once Liv nodded that she was ready with the next casting, I dropped mine, bringing us back to the material plane. Quick as a wink I grabbed up the hands of the elves, who shrieked in surprise, causing the orcs to whirl on us and snarl. But Liv was already grabbing the other hand of the one elf and waved at the orcs as she released her spell. The three charged us but passed through the space we were no longer occupying. With a cry of rage they burst through the trees, where they were swiftly cut down by the others who were waiting for them.

“Are you two okay?” Liv asked.

“Yes, we’re fine,” they announced. Not going on to say “thank you for the rescue” or anything like that, but I didn’t expect them to, so it was not a big deal.

“You have done a monumental good today,” Red Thorn told us about a half hour later as the elves, now free and about to return to their lives, went about their business. “I still feel it in the pit of my stomach. I thought slaying my captors would make it go away. I thought saving another settlement would compensate for failing my own. But it doesn’t. The guilt is still there, and I have been changed by it.”

Dramatic much? I thought.

“Still, I have given my word. Come. We will make for the Shadow Weald, and I hope you can find what you seek in that forsaken place.”

Chapter 16

“Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions.”

Red Thorn led us through the trees, the forest around us growing darker and darker the further we went. Though the way seemed treacherous and unforgiving, he somehow found a way through the increasingly twisted trees, thorns, and grasping branches that would have impeded our progress. The air grew colder and became misty as color drained from the surrounding plants, and even the sounds of birds and chittering chipmunks fell away from us. “Just beyond here,” he said, his voice sounding surprisingly loud in the stillness. “There is a clearing. Once the heart of the forest, but now it houses only horrors and nightmares. I cannot help you fight what is there, I can only pray for your success. Good luck.” He stepped back and gestured through the trees.

“Thank you,” I told him. “For the prayer, and for leading us here. We will cleanse the forest or die trying.” *Yes, that sounded appropriately dramatic, I mean he’s not the only one that is allowed to be over-the-top around here.*

“I have seen you fight, I am sure you will be victorious.”

We filed past him into the clearing, looking around nervously for any sign of life. Taking a deep breath I put my emotions into the box, I needed to be ready for whatever was to come.

“I hear it,” Snarly announced, perking up. “The pitter-patter of hoofth approaching uth.”

“I begin to perceive it as well,” Hanz agreed. “That way.” They pointed.

A second later a strange figure burst into the clearing, riding a dark horse and carrying its own head. In his other hand he carried a human spine, and cracking it like a whip seemed to be a signal as five shadowy creatures melted out of the trees to surround us. They charged as the rider vanished.

“Deflection!” I cast, as the one nearest me lashed out. It bounced off the glowing circle made in the air and shrank back a bit, seeming to hiss at me. Beside me, Snarly lashed out with a dagger but it passed through harmlessly.

Wait, isn’t there something special you need to do for these things?

All four of us scrambled out of the way as the horse reappeared, the rider charging past us and swinging the whip in a wide arc, trying to hit all of us. Snarly pushed Liv out the way and took a hit to the leg, crying out. The figure cackled and vanished again.

Hanz lasered one, while Liz shot fire at the one near her as it struck out. Thankfully bouncing off her armor and getting hit in the head.

“Deflection,” I cast again, as another targeted me and bounced away.

Can my magic even hurt these things?

We again evaded the figure riding past, making me wonder just how fast this stupid thing was. It wheeled around as Starly tried to jump on the back of the horse. It ignored him for the moment, spraying the area with what seemed to be blood. I tried to phase myself before it reached me, knowing my deflection spell wasn’t going to do much, but the blood covered me a split second before I finished casting, covering me. I winced, closing my eyes but felt the warm, sticky stuff all over me. I didn’t dare open them again but figured I was safe enough for the moment.

“Hygiene!” I cast, and the blood on me vanished. I cracked my eyes open and could see again, so I looked around. Liv was trying to get the blood off her armor of magic just by wiping at it, but not having much luck. I stepped closer to her, noting that several of the dark figures were pounding on the air so she must have, rather smartly, done her equivalent of phasing- shell. Dropping the phase I touched her, cleaning her off as well with another casting.

“Oh, thanks!” she said brightly, smiling at me. “How’s it going?”

“Not too well?” I decided, as I watched Snarly and the horseman going back and forth, Snarly finally coming out the victor and stabbing the horseman with his black dagger.

“I think we can do something about that,” Liv decided. “Defend me while I cast?”

“Sure.”

Her shell spell popped and I took over defense, casting deflection as the remaining shadow creatures could now reach us both.

I'll have to put my light spell on Snarly's blade, once he's done with the horseman. That's the only thing that can hurt these things, maybe? Or my elemental body spell I guess.

“Burn!” shouted Liv, throwing a bar of fire at the horseman. It struck him dead center and caused him to burn away, and I was surprised to see the darkness creatures melting away as well. Snarly dropped to the ground as the horse vanished, looking around to make sure everything was dealt with.

Liv and I both noticed he was looking rather hurt, and hurried to his side to get him patched up. Hanz covered us, but there was no need. Red Thorn entered the clearing as the mist started to lift and the temperature rose, so clearly the danger was past.

“Well done,” he told us. “The heart of the forest may one day recover, and it will be thanks to you. Praise the Lord.”

Wait, so did that thing move in here and corrupt the place, and in which case why and how, or did the place get corrupted and manifest that thing, again why, or did the corrupted area simply attract the creature? But killing it shouldn't have done anything in that case? I'm confused as to what just happened.

With Snarly healed up and his armor repaired once again, Liv used her distant conversation spell to call Hale and get them here.

But they're not going to be able to get here, I thought. You need to see the place you're going to teleport to it. I doubt they've ever been- and there they are. What? How? Wait, I'm doing it again.

Hale appeared in the clearing, looking around seriously. “There is an aura of corruption here, but it's fading,” he announced. “I can work with this.”

“Great!” I announced brightly. “Get that portal open at last and we can rescue my husband this very day- no- this very hour.” *Glad the first place we picked was the right place after all! Good job, us. Hold on Malachite, just a little longer.*

“Oh, no, it's not that easy,” Hale countered, not looking at me. “You'll need to take care of the other two sites.”

“What?” I replied flatly, anger beginning to burn within me. “You have got to be kidding me.” *One of them is underwater according to you.*

“Not at all. It's clear to me now, that I've seen this site. Let me know when the other two are taken care of. No need to contact me before then.” They vanished.

“Get back here and explain yourself!” I shouted to the empty air they used to occupy. “You keep changing your story!”

“I don't think they can hear you,” Snarly told me. “Thath just Hale for you. Bethideth, heth dead now.”

I grit my teeth and turned away, trying to count to twenty to avoid undoing the healing spells I had been doing on Snarly. *It would be pretty easy. A couple of needles to the head, no one would ever know. Well, they would know... I glanced at the others. But the deed would be done...*

“So where to next?” Hanz asked, ever the practical one.

“The mountains I guess,” I replied sourly, hanging my head. “It's next easiest.”

“Cold up there,” they informed us. “Might want to get warmer clothes.”

“Hang on,” I told them, “I think I have a spell that will help. Didn't I get something from when we defeated Jekserah, all those... how long ago was it? Feels like forever...”

“Who?” asked Liv.

"The elf that got us together," I explained. "Irony, as she turned out to be a cultist as well, and bringing us together will spell the ultimate doom for the entire cult. So there's that."

"Huh," she replied, looking a little concerned. But she brightened. "So do you have it with you or..."

"Did I put it in my book of spells?" I wondered aloud, reaching into my satchel and fishing the copy of my spellbook out. I flipped through it. "I could have sworn I did. Wait, is this one of my other backups?" I turned it this way and that looking it over. I had originally purchased several identical copies of the blank spellbooks and tried to keep them all up to date. But with everything that had gone on the last few months, it wasn't exactly a priority. "I don't see it in here."

"Then we have to go back and get it."

"I suppose so. I'll get Besom out and we can ride her back."

"So you will not need me to lead you out of the forest?" Red Thorn asked.

Oh right, you're still here. I shook my head. "We'll leave directly and fly out. Thank you for all your help."

"I was merely a vessel for the Lord's will. Good luck with your hunt for further corruption of this land."

"Thanks."

We flew swiftly back to Gloomhaven, landing over the wall in our own backyard, and I headed inside. Moving the part of the floor that served as our vault aside, (and yes, I asked Liv to remain upstairs so she didn't see all this), I fished out the various documents we had and glanced at the two crystals I had stuck in there, as far apart as I could make them. Light and Darkness. I still needed to figure them out, but there was never enough time in the day. Satisfied I had the right documents, I closed up the floor again with the sculpt spell and headed upstairs.

"Should be somewhere in here," I told Liv, who was sitting at the kitchen table. "We haven't found a lot of spell formula, unfortunately, so it should be fairly obvious."

"Let's take a look!" she agreed brightly.

We sorted through the papers and I sat staring at a particular set of parchments with a spell on it.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I told her. I looked to the others, Snarly looking bored and Hanz looking as they usually did. "Did I ever mention finding a spell to let someone breathe water?"

Snarly shook his head and Hanz agreed. "Such a conversation is not within my databanks," they announced. "Therefore, it did not happen."

"That's what I thought. This must have been stuck to something? Because I don't remember seeing it before now."

"Thill, pretty fortunate it's not it?" Snarly asked. "We need that too."

"We sure do," I agreed, my eyes narrowed. "We certainly do." *Where did this come from?* I looked to Liv but she was looking over the weather fortification spell she had found. *She couldn't have put it in there. Did I really miss it? Well, who knows at this point? I'm just glad we don't have to go looking to buy such a thing.*

We decided to stay there the night, and hit both locations in the morning. Liv would learn the weather spell-

"Already done!" she announced.

I closed my eyes to make sure I wasn't rolling them around, took a deep breath, and started studying the underwater breathing spell. My plan was to cast it from writings a few times, it seemed short enough, but make the three of us some "amulets" of water breathing. *Probably three will be enough?* I reasoned. *One to start us off, one in case of emergency, and one for the return trip. Nine in total, which won't be that much work but I'll want to make sure I do this properly. I don't have to*

breathe either, but I would feel a bit bad if, for example, Snarly's was done wrong, he needed another casting, and drowned thinking my work would save him. Will he still smell bad underwater? Huh...

While I worked the others went about their own business, Snarly returning from a visit to the Sleeping Lion to report the latest "buzz" was the recent tremors everyone had been feeling lately. I had felt some too, but with the chaos moon in the sky and the remains of the pre-moon civilization below it was anyone's guess day-to-day what that could be about. *Plus underground dwellers, ancient machinery, giant worms, it's a wonder the ground is as stable as it is. This can't have anything to do with the Gloom, why would it be underground?*

Meanwhile Hanz had returned with a sack full of odds and ends they said they were going to use to create "flash bang grenades" whatever that was. "May as well keep busy while you living beings are foolishly expending your limited existence in an unconscious state."

"There's probably a spell for that," I decided, looking off into the distance.

Bright and early the next day we headed for the Copperneck Mountains with the vaguest of the vague idea where we were going. My question magic was invaluable, as we neared the peaks and crags of the mountains I asked every few minutes if we were heading to a site of corruption, and adjusted our course accordingly. Strangely, as we got closer this became *less* necessary, as the weather started to get worse. Liv was quick to put the weather repelling spell on those of us that needed it, making me thankful we had acquired it all those months ago. *Little did I know we would need it.*

"And how it's bad weather a good thing?" Snarly shouted to me when I pointed out this weather was a positive sign. "Because you're thaying it like it with a good thing."

"Because it feels magical," I shouted back. "Something is manipulating the weather in this area. So we must be getting closer to something. How many other things can be in these mountains?"

"Dothens!"

Well, I mean he's not wrong...

We soon came to a narrow bridge connecting two peaks and flying overhead we saw a strange group far below. Or at least, Hanz did.

"I can make out several figures," they told us. "Armored bears with riders, ice demons, and figures in cloaks. Also they have air support in the form of two wyverns, so we should be careful."

"Shall we simply head into the astral?" I asked.

"You're pretty fast with that, right?" Liv asked, a strange look in her eyes.

"I can be, why?" I asked suspiciously but with just a hint of pride because yeah, I was, thank you very much. That's what a hundred years of practice will do for you.

"I'm going to make sure they don't cause trouble for us. As soon as we get in range I'm casting a spell to take out that bridge at least. Maybe the whole ledge? You get us into the astral and zip us into the cave when I do. Then we won't get hit by it."

Sealing the cave entrance behind us. Not a bad plan. "Okay, I can do that," I agreed. "Tell me when to dive."

"Right."

We plunged out of the sky, Snarly squeezing his eyes shut and perhaps offering a prayer we were not about to die? But my summon was a *hummingbird* for a reason, and was in complete control. *And given how the magic works, far stronger, tougher, and more accurate than I am!* Liv released her spell, targeting the area above the cave entrance and I allowed the magic to flow through my aura and into all of us, shifting us into the astral. We could barely see the rockslide in the real world as we headed into the cave, completely safe.

“Safe-fu!” Hanz cried mysteriously as we hopped off Besom, making a slicing motion with both hands. We all ignored them.

Because there were several figures we could see in the real world that we needed to deal with. They were ice elementals, and rushed to the entrance which was now completely blocked off. Thankfully the glow of the orb at the far end of the room illuminated the small space well enough to make them out, so they rushed past us and started probing the entrance. As it wasn’t completely ice or snow, but a mixture of rock and dirt they couldn’t just pass through it, and seemed to be talking about what to do next.

“Our usual surprise tactic?” Hanz asked, stroking their gun.

“Agreed,” I decided with a nod. “I know the elemental protection spell against ice, thank you Malachite, let me put it on you so we can basically ignore their attacks.”

“I’m glad to be a part of thith plan,” Snarly told me.

With the lethality of their attacks neutralized and striking from surprise, we quickly smashed the ice elementals and were left alone in the cave with the orb, which was clearly the source of the bad weather around here. I lit the place up better with my light spell, revealing a strange set of writings carved into the walls of the place.

“It’s Magician,” I announced, and Liv nodded alongside me.

“The official language of the Mage’s Guild,” she told the others. “I’m not great at it.”

“Neither am I,” I admitted. “But it doesn’t matter, I have magic for that. Give me a moment.”

“While you do that, I’ll talk to Hale,” Liv announced, and started casting her own magic.

“I’ll keep an eye on Snarly,” Hanz decided. “Don’t you *dare* touch that orb until we know more about it young man!”

“I wathn’t going to!” he insisted, pulling his hand back from going to do just that.

Hanz gave him a level stare.

Once I could read the text as though I was a native speaker I was more confused than ever, but got out my book and inkpot so I could write it all down. Liv was having a one sided conversation with the air, seemingly confused as I was. A moment later we all came back together.

“They can’t get here,” Liv announced. “Which seemed to surprise them as well. But they say this area isn’t corrupted, so this is actually something else.”

“Wait, but if not- then what- We still have further to go?” I sputtered.

“You did stop asking and just followed the path of the magic. I think this is unrelated.”

“It can’t be,” I insisted. “Who else but the Gloom cult uses ice elementals? They had robes! They were just hanging out up here with no food or water for *fun*?” I looked around the cave. Yup, still empty apart from the orb.

She shrugged.

“Whatever, I give up trying to understand these people.” I threw up my hands in disgust.

“What does the writing say?” Hanz asked.

“Oh, right. It’s a weather control device. Why it’s been stuck in this stupid cave for who knows how long and why the directions were carved into the cave walls is also bizarre, but here we are. We can turn it off to transport it.”

“And what do we do with it?” Snarly asked, eyes lighting up.

“Give it to the town,” I replied. “If it can completely control the weather, and all signs seem to point to it being able to, not just making snowstorms worse, imagine the boon it would be for farmers. They can get the exact amount of rain and sunshine their crops need. Make a gentle rain during the night and keep the clouds away during the day. I’m actually surprised something like this isn’t in use in every town! Someone clearly made it. Now maybe it was made before the war, okay, it could be studied and perhaps copied. Drought could be a thing of the past.”

“The guild would want to charge for each use,” Liv said with a grimace. “I mean, knowing them...”

“You’re not wrong,” I agreed. “But Gloomhaven and the guild can work out that deal. Or maybe the town can sell it to a larger town that has more farms, or work out some kind of deal. It could be teleported to various places in a single day to provide an hour of rain in places that need it. I just think we can’t use it directly ourselves, let’s get it into the hands of those that can most benefit from it.”

“That’th fair,” he agreed, then brightened again. “We’ll be heroeth for bringing it to the people!”

“That we will, my friend, that we will. Let’s get it deactivated, and get out of here.”

Chapter 17

“But a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being; nor can the dead ever be brought back to life.”

With the orb safely stowed we pressed on, again flying high on Besom and following the directions of my question spell. We didn't have far to go. Heading more upwards than forward brought us to the summit, where a strange looking creature burst forth from some kind of nest and screamed at us.

“You dare approach my nest?” it cried. “I'll harvest your corpses and feed them to my children!”

That thing is a mother? I thought in disgust. *What even is it?* It was large, winged, and misshapen, with it taking to the air and Besom jostling around it was hard to get a good look.

Besom wasted no time, trying to needle it but the thing dodged to the side, and I had no better luck a second later. Liv followed it up with a wound spell, which connected and did some major damage, but not enough to finish the creature off. It attacked with what looked like a stream of insects of all things, forcing Besom to zip to the side. Snarly had been frantically tying a knot around one of his daggers, which he threw at the creature, but it bounced off the thing's chest. Hanz got a shot off, which went wide, but that just meant it didn't see my needles coming in from the other side. That did the trick, and it burned away.

“Wait, that thing was a demon?” Liv asked, looking around as we landed. “Nothing else burns up like that.”

“So it seems,” I agreed. “Strange to find something like that here. Look around for any ‘children’ and take care of them.”

“Right!”

There were some “eggs” scattered about the place that we hastily crushed, but not much else. We stood for a moment, somewhat confused, but after I asked my question spell if this was the site of corruption we were seeking and got a “yes” answer, we decided our job was done.

“Like Hale said, no need to contact them until we have all three locations taken care of,” Liv reminded us. “So let's just go.”

“Agreed,” I agreed.

As before we had little to go on to find the underwater site, but my question magic reliably sent us out over the water and when I got a “no” answer I knew we had gone just a bit too far and had Besom backtrack. I made everyone some nice, heavy rocks they could hold onto, they activated their water breathing necklaces, and I canceled out Besom, plunging us into the waters below. It swiftly got dark but a light spell was easy enough to cast, the magic of my water breathing spell making it seem like water was air. Or at least natural to breathe, so I had no trouble speaking the words of the spell. We continued downward, coming to a stop on top of what we later discovered was an underwater dome. I had to ask my question magic several things to decide we needed to step off the “dome” and head further down, in order to find the entrance to the place. So that's exactly what we did, looking around until we finally came to an opening, which we entered.

Down the corridor our way was blocked by several strange looking stalks, clearly some kind of plant but looking like seaweed had been crossed with a crab's claw. It sensed us somehow, reaching out to grasp us but we stayed out of range, considering our options.

“They don't seem to be able to move,” Hanz began. “I think phasing magic would be most appropriate here. Going into the astral would be troublesome because there is little light at this location.”

I scowled, swiping a hand through the water around us. “You know, you don’t think about it, or at least I never have, but phasing we must displace air, right?”

“Agreed, that is a logical and scientifically accurate statement,” Hanz allowed. “Ah, you are concerned the water will make phasing, or perhaps *unphasing* more unpleasant?”

“Exactly. You don’t really think about air, but it does exist. Just like this water exists. It’s magic, so it *should* be okay, but I must caution you that I’ve never tried it while underwater. Maybe we should have thought ahead to try it at the shore. And that’s on me, so I apologize. I have no idea what will happen when we come out of the phase. The water could get harmlessly pushed out of the way just like the air does, or we could get seriously hurt by it. I’m just telling you the risks beforehand.”

“There is no sound of displacement,” Hanz mused. “And you think there would be. I will take the risk and put my faith, such as it is, in your magic.”

Snarly nodded, as did Liv after a moment.

“Okay,” I told them. “Gather around, and remember, don’t let go!”

We continued through the passageways without incident, past more strange plants that existed down here in the lightless depths, until we came to a gradual upward slope, and suddenly found ourselves in an air pocket. As there was nothing around I dropped the phase on us, taking the opportunity to never need to know what might have happened, and we looked around. We had come to an ancient and strange-looking city, long abandoned and crumbling. The size of the place astonished us, as did the detail- majestic black columns holding up the ceiling. Dwellings, temples, open spaces, all of it in the silence below the ocean. *How could such a thing even be constructed? I wondered. Mages with water breathing and stone shaping magic, carving out the place over decades? Then using some of the stone they moved to create the buildings? The effort it must have taken, and to get to! How did they fill it with air? There must have been easier places they could have created a city, especially if whoever did this was just going to abandon it like this.*

It felt like we could explore the place for days, it was so large. Perhaps this was because my light could only reach so far, or perhaps it truly was enormous. I couldn’t have said how long we walked past buildings and side paths, hinting at secrets around every corner. We had a job to do, and we knew we could come back here any time. Even so, we felt some kind of pull towards the center, and with a look of wordless understanding we headed there. The light revealed a huge plant creature, a single eyestalk that opened to show glistening teeth, ready to welcome us. More of the strange plants perked up as well, clearly not needing the water to move around. It appeared we had found our-

“Wound!” Liv cried, the disgust in her voice clear as day. The magic struck and tore the eyeball in half, making it thrash around and causing a rumble that shook the entire place. We could hear the crashing of stone, echoing in the distance, and smaller pebbles fell upon us, but it quickly subsided. The thing went still, lying there dead, and the smaller versions around the room quickly shriveled and blew away.

“Thave thum for the reth of uth!” Snarly complained, taking his hand off his dagger.

“That thing was disgusting!” Liv protested. “Did you see it? You must have seen it. I did what I had to do!”

“Even wounding something that large would have proved problematic for me,” I agreed. “Well done with the spell.” *She either put a lot of her life force into that magic, or the spell itself must do damage regardless of the size of the creature. Either way, I’m not complaining about not getting to fight it. What a strange ... monster.*

“Oh. Thanks.” She looked away cutely. “Should I call Hale?”

“Do it.”

Liv turned to us a few minutes later. “We have to go,” she announced. “Something is happening in Gloomhaven. The tremors just started getting worse, and they can see some kind of black column

forming in the city. They think maybe these were once places that kept the Gloom out of our reality? They got corrupted but still were doing their job? But now that we've disrupted them... well, they're not sure."

"We're the bad guys?" Snarly asked, looking concerned.

"We acted on the information we had at the time," I told him. "Don't worry about it. Let's just go."

We hurried back to the entrance, which was now sealed up not that this fact bothered any of us in the least. We phased past it, back into the water, and then started our ascent. Even though we were phased we could "swim" upwards, just like we didn't fall through the floor while phased and could walk around, the magic allowed us to move in the way we normally could given the environment we found ourselves in. *Which is an interesting quality of this spell that's not really specified. I should make a note in my own book when I get a moment.*

Flying back to the city we saw the black column Hale had described, some kind of swirling whirlwind not quite in the center of town. People were panicking and rushing about, the guard was forming up near it, but we headed to the Crooked Bone.

"There you are," Hale told us as we landed. "There isn't much time. As you can see, there is no need for me to open any portal to the realm of the Gloom. The portal you need stands before you. "Bastian. The poor man always meant well, but..." They are interrupted by a tremor, almost strong enough to knock you all over. "You must go!" They handed me a small sack, that seemed to have some rocks and sand in it. "This will prevent the worst of the effects from the crossing. You must find him, and prevent him crossing over to this world. If he does, there won't be much we can do to prevent another war."

"Wait, who?" I ask, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Just go, he could be steps away from the portal at this very moment," they insist. "It's up to you."

They vanished.

You have got to be kidding me.

"Once more into the breach, it seems," Hanz tells us. "At least there should be no more delays in rescuing Malachite."

"Heth--"

I glared at Snarly.

"Probably fine," he finished.

"Let's go."

The scene was one of pandemonium, at the base of the strange "twister" that had formed in the city. The guard, or at least some of it, was arrayed around the thing. People were trying to get as far from the phenomenon as possible, a natural response we had to fight against as we walked right up to it.

"What do you think you're doing?" one of the guard called to us as we got closer.

"Going in," I told him. "Which among you are man, woman, or otherwise enough to join us?"

"We have to protect the city from anything that comes out," he spat. "That's our job. Not walking into... into... whatever that is!"

"Then stay out of our way." I looked to the others, who nodded, and we boldly strode forward, me holding my breath and squinting against the swirling sand. I didn't know what this pouch was, but I held it before me. The "crossing" as Hale had put it hit us all at once, like the sand had become a hundred times more deadly, slamming into us not to knock us over but simply to cause us pain. But the pouch responded, glowing and numbing the sensation so we could emerge from the storm into a gray world full of black sand, a strange castle seen in the distance. The pouch crumbled and was gone.

"We've just crossed over into... the Gloom Zone," Hanz intoned. "No welcoming committee."

"Ith that good or bad?" Snarly asked.

"Clearly nothing came out, the guard wasn't fighting anything," Liv reasoned. "And there's only one thing nearby. That structure. Let's get going."

"Right."

"Wait," I cautioned. "One thing first. I can't make any mistakes now..." I began casting my question spell, the others familiar enough with it now to not need to ask what I was doing. "Is Malachite in that structure I can see?"

Uncertain

"What?" That took me back. "Is he there or not?"

"What happened?" Liv asked.

"I didn't get a clear yes or no. Ah, I bet it's protected in some way. Well, it wasn't a no, so at least there's the possibility of a yes. Let's go." I cast, getting out Athame and jumping up on her back. I wasn't going to walk all that way, after all.

"People have been this way," Snarly told us as we made our way across the black sand that served at the ground here. "Thirteen of them, unleth I mith my gueth."

"That's a surprisingly accurate assessment," Hanz remarked. "May I ask how you arrived at it?"

"Thillth!" he chirped.

"I see."

"They can't have that much of a head start on us," Liv decided. "I'm surprised we can't see them. It's just flat here."

"But clear," I remarked. "Why is a gloom dimension full of black sand? It's not the black sand dimension."

"It has to be filled with something solid?"

"I guess."

We reached the fortress without incident or seeing another living thing, and the portal inside stood open. I could see arrow slits, window frames, and high towers but everything seemed to be made of this black sand. Compressed somehow into a solid enough form for walls, but as there were no trees or other materials there were no doors or windows. I stayed on Athame, the door was big enough I didn't have to even recline my head as we passed through, and we looked around. Along the walls were "torches" again made of black sand, but the top of each one glowed as though on fire. *Neat*. Again, nothing stirred, not even a mouse. The place looked huge from the outside and the inside didn't disappoint, presenting us with rooms and side hallways aplenty as we made our way deeper. This main hallway ran straight ahead so we followed it, figuring any major chamber would be at the center of the place. We weren't disappointed.

The main chamber opened to a vaulted ceiling, and upon the floor, meters across, a complex circle had been painstakingly chiseled. The only other thing in the room was a column of light, and a green blob could be seen inside it. I was surprised to see Snarly charging forward, but then realized I wasn't surprised at all. *Remember the vault incident? Of course you do*. He made to jump into the light, a very foolish prospect without knowing what it was, but noble if it had worked to dislodge the figure within. He bounced back instead.

"Maybe some sort of status spell?" Liv guessed. "I'm sure we can take care of it somehow."

"I will cover you while you investigate," Hanz told us.

“Why are we bothering?” I asked. “It’s not dangerous to us, let’s move on. We need to find this Bastain or Gloom or whatever Hale was talking about.”

“You don’t want to rescue your husband?” Liv asked, shocked.

“Why? Do you see him?” I looked around, but there really wasn’t anything else in the room.

“Inside the statis?” She gestured.

“Wait, hang on.” I took another look, and squinting at it I could see that, yes, that big green lump could in fact be my husband. “I think you’re right!”

She looked at me as if I was crazy but I climbed off Athame and walked around the column, looking it over. “We’ll have to be careful,” I remarked.

“Why hesitate?” Liv asked. “I would have thought you would be trying to beat the thing down the moment you saw it. Haven’t you been obsessed with getting here the last week?”

I glanced at her out of the corners of my eyes. “Liv, this is what we in the business call ‘a trap.’ Look around. Snarly says some people came this way- where are they? The Gloom knows where we live, heck they attacked our house not two weeks ago. They must have known we would be here almost at once after that portal opened. Yet the place is empty? I don’t buy it. Something else is going on here. Maybe this is some kind of illusion to taunt me, and it’s actually just a stone pillar, and that’s why Snarly bounced off it. Maybe he’s seconds from dying, and me freeing him from this will only allow me to see the life leave his eyes. Maybe it’s trapped to blow this whole place up, and the Gloom is standing outside chortling into his soup with anticipation of watching this whole place come down on our heads. Why would he need it anymore? He wants our world, remember? He won’t come back here if he can help it. We look it over carefully, *then* we act. I won’t walk into a trap now that I’m so close to getting my husband back.”

“Well I mean when you put it like that...”

We looked around the chamber. It was empty. There were three side passages on the far side of the room, leading to more empty hallways and rooms, and the only magic in the area was the spell holding Malachite. But I didn’t like it. It was too “easy.” Letting us wander around? It didn’t make sense. But everyone agreed if there was a trap here about to close, it was too subtle to see.

“What method will you employ to free him?” Hanz asked, back to me again and trying to cover all four hallways at once.

“I’ll suppress the spell,” I explained. “It’s a *permanent* spell, not sure you know what that means but basically you cast it once and it continues until the caster dies. Those types are rare, for reasons. I guess The Lord simply wanted it that way? But in any case, if I suppress it, it’s gone. It won’t be cast again, and it’s not maintained by the caster’s mana core. So how would it come back?”

“I will leave the arcane arts to you. Good luck.”

“Thanks. Okay, here we go.” I gathered ambient mana and took all the time I could, symbols swirling around the column. As I let it go the light flickered out and he crumpled to the floor.

“Finally the sacrifice can begin!” a voice rang out, and from nowhere stepped several figures and elementals, a group of each from each side passage.

“See, trap!” I gloated. “Malachite, are you with us?”

“...”

“Crap!”

They just laughed.

“I’ll try and get him up,” Liv insisted. “You cover me.”

“Right.”

Touching my necklace I used one of my spell symbols. “Become Light!” My body shimmered, becoming an elemental form, saving me from having to worry about damaging spells, at least. Magic circles appeared at my feet, at least one of the cultists was casting something which was fine. I scanned

the room, there were probably four cultists and half a dozen different elementals, which was tough odds but we had faced that many before and-

“Argh!” Snarly failed to dodge a beam of light that impacted him in the body and made him stagger back.

Oh great.

I picked the nearest elemental, heading for Hanz, and cast my wind needles on it. Sadly, the elemental I picked seemed to be air, and so it did nothing. I mentally chided myself for not looking a bit closer, this was the final battle I needed to be at my best! It reached them and swiped out, impacting their arm and causing sparks to fly.

Not the greatest start, is it?

They returned the favor by shooting it in the head, and it started to burn away.

That's better.

The next nearest one seemed to be made of rock, and was heading towards Snarly so I cast, needles slamming into it and driving it back. It too started to burn away.

Two down.

Bands of force wrapped around Snarly, and he wiggled and fell over. “Hey!” he cried.

If they need him alive it's for a reason. Hopefully their focus will now be elsewhere and he'll be safe. Odd to use non-lethal means now though...

Two spells went off around me. Because I didn't feel like being impacted, and simply wishing magic away was a thing, I did just that. Thought about it real hard so at least one of the spells didn't touch me. The other however did manage to affect me, and the world sped up.

Oh great, I'm in some kind of slow time bubble or something?

I gave a start as a stream of fire narrowly missed me, not that I would have bothered dodging in this state. I did a double take, where had that come from? I looked to the side, Liv was lowering her hands, she must have been shooting at something behind me, but Malachite who I saw was stirring must have simply caught sight of her doing a spell in my direction. Of course he wouldn't know who she was! He lashed out, claws ripping into her, and she squeaked and staggered back, dropping.

“No! She's on our side!” I said, though being slowed like this it took a long time to say from an outside perspective and he just stared at me. *He probably can't even understand me, I'm talking too slowly. Crap! Hang on Liv, I can't touch you right now to heal you and I can't drop this elemental body without risking myself. Just hang on a few seconds and I'll heal you.*

“Thesacrificecanstillbecompleted,fortheGloom'sreturn!” someone shouted.

What was that? Oh crap! A huge circle covered the ground around us, so I knew something big was coming.

The ice elemental shot ice at Hanz, followed closely by the fire elemental. They managed to duck out of the way of both.

Fire erupted from around us, Malachite leaping to Snarly's defense, but I couldn't tell if he had made it in time or if Snarly was dead too.

We should have insisted some of the guard come with us. Crap! My wind magic is going to be impacted by this stupid time based spell because it's governed by Mercury. Have to get rid of it. You- I think you were the one. I cast my knockout beam in the direction of the guy I was pretty sure was maintaining the temporal effect on me, but it missed. *Come on!*

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Snarly, now apparently freed from his bondage, being thrown at the two cultists that had come from the direction we did.

I mean, I'm all for using what you have available but my love, hurling the dead body of our friend as a weapon is just a bit too much don't you- Oh, he's still alive thank the Lord! Snarly scratched and bit at the cultist he landed on, distracting him at least. They vanished into the darkness of the hallway.

Hanz got a shot off towards the fire elemental, and in looking around I noticed the ice elemental was gone? *Did the cultist simply not care and killed his own ally? Rude, but good for us.*

A demon of darkness appeared near Malachite, so he turned to deal with it as Snarly came flying back into the room. He did a flip and landed on his feet, still ready for action.

The cultist I was targeting before was casting another spell, so this time I played it smart. I started casting my knockout spell again, empowering it this time and waiting to cast it until he released his spell. Hard to dodge a beam coming at your head when you were concentrating on releasing a spell, so I figured that would be my best chance to act.

Snarly was dealing with the nearby cultists with his poison sword, which I felt would be a fitting end for them.

As fire started to erupt around the room again I released my knockout beam, hitting the guy in the head. The world sped up again as he got knocked out and fried by backfiring his spell. I blinked, glad things were moving at normal speed again, and sent three separate castings of my needle spell into the fire elemental. It was simply bad luck, I figured, as usually only one was enough, but finally he went down. The cultists were I guess getting desperate by that time, having drawn their daggers in such a way as to stab themselves and rushing to get into the circle.

That's not ideal, what exactly are they trying to do?

Snarly rushed one, trying to knock him out of the circle, Malachite took the air to do the same to another. With those dealt with I empowered my next attack and was pleased when the light demon I targeted burned away, leaving only the cultists in the room with us. I did a "Thrust!" on the one still in the circle, blowing him back and making him crack his head on the wall behind him. He staggered forward again, but didn't get far as Hanz blew his head off.

At least he didn't suffer long. What am I thinking, he's a cultist. He should have suffered a hundred times as long! Liv!

I rushed to Liv's side, now that the cultists were more or less managed, my elemental body flickering out now that I decided I didn't need it anymore. I dropped to my knees and quickly cast my lesser healing spell, which should be enough to stabilize her and "take my time" with the rest of the healing. The spell that I couldn't fail to cast didn't take hold, sliding off her body and doing nothing.

"No, no, no!" I cried, but I had to be sure. I cast my simple repair spell instead, which did take hold, slightly stitching up her flesh. She was gone. Dead. Here. Killed by the person we were trying to save. "Shit!" I swore.

"She will be but the first!" one of the cultists cried triumphantly. "Even now we-"

I blew him off his feet with another casting of "Thrust!"

"I've had enough of this!" I screamed. "All you cultists will *pay for this!* Sculpt!" I slapped my hand on the stone floor, grabbed a handful of stone as though it was putty, and yanked. The symbol distorted, a meter of stone around me rippling like water as I broke the connections to the rest of the circle that were carved here. It flashed, went dark again, but I wasn't letting up. I could shape a meter of contiguous stone every few seconds, and I was going to make sure this circle, whatever it was, could never be used again.

The other cultists were finished off as I worked, and I was surprised to see Salliven of all people striding into the place. "Looks like I've missed the action," she said, looking around.

Nice of someone else to show up to save the world, I thought. Little late though.

Malachite landed next to me, and I saw he was hurt. "One second," I told him. "I want to mess this up some more,"

"Oh, no rush my dear," he growled through gritted teeth. "Nice to see you too."

Yeah, well, you just killed the person that could have healed you, so deal with it. "Hey I'll have you know that-" *What's happening to the light around here?*

"The unending ire of the Gloom," a voice rang out. "You really have made a mess of my plans, haven't you?" I looked up to see a figure standing there, a wanderer. Wearing a black cloak and with a

haze of darkness drifting around them. They had two swords in their hands, and their purple armor glinted darkly. "I'm not going to allow you to prevent me from leaving this place."

"So why didn't you just leave while we were distracted in here?" Hanz asked.

"I... uh... huh." That seemed to stump the figure. It was a good point, after all. "Don't try to distract me! Come forth, my servant!" He cast, and a bizarre looking creature appeared before him.

"Healing!" I cast, touching Malachite after empowering myself. His wound closed up completely.

"Ah, thanks!" he said with a nod. He took to the air as Salliven shouted "I'll take the creature!" and Snarly rushed to the side, probably to try and get around the Gloom or Harold or whatever his name was. I empowered his attack, figuring it would be the height of irony if Snarly dealt the killing blow in all this, but he didn't get a chance. Malachite landed on top of the Gloom and ripped him apart with his claws. Both vanished.

"Aw!" Snarly complained, coming to a stop. "Did we win?"

It can't be that easy. "Grow!" I cast on Malachite, an old favorite back for the final confrontation. He doubled in size, looking around for the next trick. But the place stayed quiet.

"Okay then," I finally decided. "Well, that's not all the cultists if Snarly is right. You two, come over here and I'll repair slash heal you, as needed."

"Don't get the two confused," Hanz remarked.

"Why don't you heal Liv?" Snarly asked.

I shook my head sadly. "She didn't make it."

"Oh no!"

"I know. But I'm not sure this is over. Don't let your guard down."

"Okay."

I healed and repaired the others, Malachite returning into the room to say nothing was obviously happening in any of the corridors beyond.

"We'll have to check the whole place," I told them. "Those others are here-"

"Let's try that again, shall we?" that wanderer's voice rang out again.

Chapter 18

“The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy”

We looked and they were back, now with eight arms somehow, and eight swords too. Sallivan wasted no time in getting close, Malachite was right behind him. They were waving their swords around like a madman, and somehow at the end of it slices of darkness shot out and bounced between all of us. We were all impacted, and they grinned triumphantly though somehow we were all still on our feet. *My prayers being answered, perhaps? Was there not the spark of divinity that has enabled us to carry on this fight?* Snarly moved to get closer again, I healed myself figuring he couldn't do that sort of move all that quickly. *Please, oh Lord, don't allow him to do that move again all that quickly!*

Hanz shot him, striking him in the eye and causing him to cry out, and Snarly hit at the same time, chopping into his leg with the poison sword. *That's a good start!*

But it seemed to be lucky hits as he started weaving around dodging the others, so I cast a balk spell on him, hoping that would help. It did, Snarly got him with the poison blade again, right through the chest. But he managed to avoid Hanz's next shot and my needles, making me scowl. I felt my next balk not take hold either, making me wonder exactly what this guy's luck was, as that's how you could decide not to be affected by the balk spell.

He cast again, and now I saw that he was under a time spell as well, the opposite one that I was put under, and some sort of suppression magic went up around the room. Felt like it was trying to suppress the range magic could operate under, an odd choice when there were three fighters crowded around him and now only one magic user. Me. Why be dragged down by trying to concentrate on such a high level spell against one person, while ignoring the three more martial fighters arrayed against you? Not that it mattered, I had enough range even being hampered like this, and cast a suppression spell, targeting his time magic. It took hold and he slowed dramatically. This allowed Sallivan to go for the head, driving them back as she chopped into them. Not to be outdone Malachite tore into their head too, and they flopped to the ground, arms and swords vanishing as they did.

We all held our breath, wondering if this time it was truly over. It wasn't, the figure rose one last time as though being jerked upwards on strings.

“You can destroy my vessel and keep me on this plane, but it will never be enough. I am eternal. I will return. I will feast on your world again!” The body once again crumpled to the ground and vanished.

“Yeah, you have fun with that,” I told the empty air.

“Tho it's over?” Snarly asked.

“I think it actually is, this time,” I agreed. “Come on. Let's sweep this place and get out before the gateway back closes. I don't want to leave any cultists here to work on getting him back a third time...”

“Let us make haste, then,” Hanz agreed. “The right passageway first?”

“One second.” I got out a handkerchief and went over to Liv, repairing her body and cleaning it with my hygiene spell so she was at least presentable. With that done I shrunk her down and wrapped her tiny body in the cloth, cradling her in both hands.

“For real though,” Malachite told me. “She was aiming for you. Pretty sure I recognized her from where I appeared when I was captured. She was a cultist too.”

“Impossible!” I scoffed. “She fought by our side, killed cultists the same as we did. She must have been aiming for something beyond me. You're mistaken.”

“If you say so, my dear.”

I sighed. This wasn't how I had envisioned this going (I hadn't even gotten to throw him the ice sword token I had made so we could cut our way out) but then, when does reality ever cooperate with you? "It is good to see you, sorry our reunion hasn't gone exactly as planned."

He waved that off. "It hasn't been that long for me, I got put in a spell I think? We can catch up later, when we're away from this awful place."

"Agreed."

We swiftly rushed the rest of the place, finding the rest of the cultists, dead in a smaller circle which I also messed up. Snarly stabbed them all a few times "just to be sure" and we all wondered aloud what it meant that they had apparently all killed themselves. There was nothing else of interest in the place so we headed back to the entrance, flying on Malachite like it was old times. We made it through and back to Gloomhaven, the portal winking out behind us while we explained what had happened to the captain of the guard, Orzellon.

"So it's over, then?" he asked, probably not that interested in the minor details but wanting a big picture view.

"It's over," I told him, "when my magic says every Gloom cultist in the area is dead and all mention of the place is burned and gone. But for now, yes, the danger has passed."

"That's a relief," he decided. "Right, thanks for the report. All right everyone!" he roared, turning to face the crowds and his guardsmen. "Show is over. Return to your homes."

"The great Snarly has saved us again!" a cry went up. "Three cheers for the great Snarly!"

"Hooray!" everyone cheered. This went on for some time, Snarly smiling and waving at everyone as a hero is wont to do, but finally the guards started breaking up the crowd.

"So now what?" Malachite asked.

"Maybe get you home, and into some clothes? Or maybe stay like that now that I think about it?" I suggested, wiggling my eyebrows.

"Missed me, huh?"

"I did nothing but struggle to find you, my love," I told him honestly. "Delay after delay made me think you were rotting away in a cell, or dead, but I never lost faith. Despite how many times Snarly said you were dead now."

"I never did!" he insisted.

I glared at him, then sighed, lifting the body of Liv. "Seriously, get some clothes on. We need to bury her and tell her aunt what happened. My magic can't keep her this size forever."

"But dinner after, right?" he asked, scratching the side of his face. "I'm starving."

We stopped at home to pick up a few things, and I recast the shrink spell on Liv's body. After taking off the healing sandals I had given her, of course. *No sense burying a magic item, no matter how strange it is. Wait, if I had used thrust on her right away would she have gone the ten meters needed to at least seal up her wound partially and save her – never mind.* Snarly said he knew where her aunt lived, so we headed over there. I knocked on the door and an elderly woman answered.

"Yes?" she asked, opening her door a crack.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but are you Liv's aunt? She often spoke of you..."

"Yes. I'm Jude. What's this all about?"

"May we come in? I have some sad news..."

She looked the four of us over, scowling at the hulking form of Malachite and wrinkling her nose because Snarly was still with us, of course.

"I'll just stay out here," Malachite suggested, looking at the low doorframe. "I didn't really know her anyway."

"Fine," Jude agreed, opening the door. "Come on in."

We headed inside and I set the small bundle down on her living room floor. She glanced at it curiously but it was too small to be anything of much interest. Little did she know. "I met your niece when she approached us after my husband was abducted by cultists," I begin. "She was a great help to us, never questioning what we needed to do, and fought by our side many times. We managed to rescue my husband, the draig you saw out there, but... I'm sorry. She didn't make it. There were too many of them and... I'm sorry. This may be hard to see..." I unwrapped the bundle and let the spell go, allowing her body to return to her natural size. Jude's eyes got wide and she threw a hand over her mouth.

"She's dead?"

"I'm very sorry for your loss. She was a talented spellcaster, and I'm sure she'll be missed."

"My niece is dead?" She was tearing up. "My Alivia is gone?"

I nodded mutely, and while Hanz looked the same way they always did, not really having facial expressions, at least Snarly had the decency to look sad. In my quarter century of life I had seen many of those I knew pass on; so while this death was a tragedy and I felt bad, she had known the risks. Jude sat down heavily on the couch, and I sat next to her, putting an arm around her as she cried. Hanz stood impassively while Snarly looked around, probably calculating the value of everything in the room, but I stayed next to Jude while she tried to get control of herself.

"So what happens now?" she asked.

I sighed and gestured to Hanz, to brought out a small sack. "This is the money she earned in my service," I told her, as they set it down on the table. "I know it's not a substitute, but hopefully it can ease your life a little. She died at our side, fighting to rescue my husband just as much as I did." *Not going to mention she was killed by the very person she went to save. It's not really a lie, just ... something she doesn't need to know. It was my fault, she was employed by me. How was I to know he would simply lash out? He must have been mistaken about her attacking me.*

Jude stared at it. "I think she fell in with a bad crowd," she said at last. "She was never the same, after the war. I'm glad she did find someone so honest and willing to look out for her."

Ah, yes, well, let's just gloss over... I blinked. *Bad crowd? Is Malachite right? Was she a cultist? Was she working against us the whole time? By all appearances she was an ally, and that's how I'm going to continue to think of her.* "Sometimes we make poor choices, it is not up to us to judge someone's soul. That task falls to those assigned to it by the Lord. Did she have a favorite spot? Somewhere you would like her buried? I'm happy to take care of it. I'm not a priest, but I'm happy to say a few words."

"Could hardly afford one anyway," she remarked bitterly. She drew in a shaky breath and thought a moment. "The tree? In the back yard? Could you bury her beneath it?"

I nodded. "If you would like."

Twenty minutes later Jude said she was ready and I shrunk her down again. We headed out the back and to the yard, and I set her down. "Ah, one moment," I begged Jude, and did a quick question spell. "Is it safe to dig here?"

Yes

Okay, whew. For all I knew opening a hole here would reveal some long forgotten tunnel full of more dangerous remnants or something. I got out the wand we had recovered all those weeks ago and tapped the ground with it, activating it and using up a "charge." Though an application of willpower I didn't roll my eyes at the absurdities of making such an item this way, as it was actually coming in handy- something I never believed would be possible- and we laid her to rest. Malachite helped me shove the dirt back in, and I created a gravestone by summoning it out of thin air. "Oh Lord," I prayed, standing at the foot of the grave, "watch over this soul that has entered your kingdom. I pray that she

not be judged harshly, and the good she did in the world can serve as a balance to any misguided deeds she may have performed. She worked as a mercenary, this is true, but without complaint. Without fear. The loss of her knowledge and skill means a bright light has left the world, and we are all the less fortunate for the loss."

I stepped back to let Jude say a few words, then we stepped away.

"Thank you," she said. "For bringing her home. A mercenary company like yours, I get the feeling you didn't have to. But you did it anyway. It means a lot."

"Of course. This is our address." I held out a slip of paper I had prepared beforehand, and she took it. "If there's ever anything that you need, please don't hesitate to reach out."

She nodded sadly. "I will."

"Then we will take our leave. Unless you would rather I stay?"

She shook her head. "There are others I should tell about her... passing. I won't keep you."

"Very well. Goodbye."

We took our leave and headed back to the house. We were all kind of standing around in the kitchen, not sure what to do now.

"So did I miss anything important?" Malachite finally asked.

"Orchid thpent every waking moment trying to get back to you," Snarly told him. "Glad you're not dead, big guy."

"Yes, I too am relieved to have you back," Hanz agreed. "We have saved the world, may I remind everyone? We should have a more celebratory mood, if my logic processors are not in error."

"And Malachite," I agreed, reaching up to touch his arm. "Don't worry, I'll be more in the mood to celebrate later. It's just a lot right now." *Had she died to a cultist's spell, it would have been one thing. But with this uncertainty hanging over us, and the very real fact that Malachite was the one that killed her...*

"Perhaps a day or two off will be just what you need," they decided. "We have been working rather non-stop towards a singular goal. It will take time to establish a rhythm again. Come Snarly, let us leave the two reunited lovers to catch up."

"Catch up on what?" he asked, as Hanz took his hand and started dragging him away.

"I'll tell you when you're older."

"You always say that!"

"And it's always true."

The two of them headed out the door, and I hugged Malachite tight. "I'm glad to have you back," I whispered. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm totally fine," he assured me. "Honestly, it's been just a few hours for me. I wound up somewhere strange, they were clearly ready for *someone* to appear there, but when no one else showed they started to get worried and wonder what to do with me. I guess the ritual needed a certain number of sacrifices or something?"

"Clearly, as they didn't just kill you outright."

"Exactly what I was thinking!"

"And to that end!" I pulled back, wondering how I could slap him without cutting myself on his scales or breaking my hand. "Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again, you hear me!"

"Wha?" His eyes widened in surprise.

"Shoving me like that! If there's danger we face it *together*, remember? We're a team. Getting yourself caught like that, being completely alone. What were you thinking?"

"That spell could have been anything!" he protested. "It could have just killed out outright! I couldn't chance it. You might be able to feel a magical portal and know it's different from a magic fireball before it goes off, but I can't!"

I glared at him but had to concede the point. “Okay, fine,” I muttered, leaning against him again. “Jerk. Maybe shove me away from something and *don’t* get caught in the spell next time? I mean, really. It’s so weird anyway... that spell targeted me, shoving me should have made it miss but not hit you anyway. Unless it worked by just taking anything in that radius that happened to be there? I guess then it was lucky it didn’t cut me in half or something. Or you!” I glared again.

“Shove and dodge, got it!” he agreed with a grin. “Can you shrink me down or something? Being so tall does have its disadvantages.”

“I guess I won’t charge you for the service,” I decided. “This being your first day back after being captured. But we’re going to have to come up with some longer-term solution. Especially if you keep growing.” I poked him in the stomach.

“I’m not growing there!”

I shrank him down and we sat down in the living room. I took his hand.

“So what’s our next move?” he asked. “You were telling the guard captain it wasn’t quite over. Did you mean that?”

“Of course I did. We can’t give them time to regroup. Or plan some kind of revenge tour against us. Involving the town is bad news, and they know where we live. I mean we just defeated their ‘god’ and you’ll notice I didn’t say ‘kill.’ The Gloom itself could still be in contact with others here, and we saw how the cultists there were willing to throw their lives away. Now maybe that ‘ritual’ could only be done there, and now that I’ve messed up their circle and killed the physical form the Gloom was using it can’t be easily redone. But we can’t take any chances. I doubt those thirteen were the last cult members alive.”

He nodded. “No rest for the wicked, huh? That’s fine. We need something to occupy our time.”

“It won’t be all work and no play,” I told him. “We’ll have a wedding to plan, our real one as far as everyone else is concerned, now that most of the danger has passed. We’ll have to start now, if we’re going to have it in six months or so. Hopefully it won’t take *that* long to hunt down the remainder of the cult and put an end to it.”

“I should hope not!” he agreed. “But love, are you sure it’s healthy to go on this ‘revenge tour’ or whatever you’re going to call it? It’s going to mean killing a bunch of cultists.”

“They could surrender,” I mused. “Tricky to know what to do in that case, I admit. They would have knowledge about rituals and the Gloom I would rather see wiped out of the world. I mean we’ve already had two Gloom wars in a way now. The first one, which we saw when we went back in time, and this one we just prevented by moving fast and keeping him from crossing over. Not that we did, by the way. He could have just left instead of taunting us, so I guess he was never that bright. We don’t need a third.”

“Shouldn’t the guild be involved in all this? The cult is using magic inappropriately; that’s their whole thing. I mean they attacked us in the street for goodness sakes!”

I took a deep breath. “You’re not wrong. Not being a member will make it more tricky, but there is a way I could at least get my foot in the door, so to speak. With all the magic I’ve been doing lately, I’m confident I can pass the test and take on a new title. That way I could make some demands and at least get some help.”

“Title?”

“You’ll see.” I leaned into him. “No shop talk now. Just hold me. I am glad you’re safe. I thought of nothing else while you were gone. It could have been much worse, so let’s just enjoy this happy ending for a while.”

He chuckled and put his arm around me. “Anything you say, my dear.”

This is nice. I needed this. He’s safe. We’re safe. We won. The cult was dealt a blow. I can relax now. Set the burden down, Orchid. Pick it back up tomorrow. Today, it’s just this. This is my victory.

Chapter 19

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.”

“What are we doing here again?” Malachite asked me. I sighed a little bit. It was four days later, we had delivered the weather controlling orb to the city, which was now regulating the weather for the benefit of the farmers in the area. It was helping them out tremendously, and I heard more than one passerby talking about how great it was Snarly had recovered such an artifact. Otherwise, we had taken two days for ourselves, to rest, and put in a day of flying to reach Limlal, where we could pay to be teleported to Amaranthia, home of the Mage’s Guild. Thankfully, Limlal was the home of the great arena, dedicated to Gressh’dronnar, the dragon version of dodgeball. As beings from all over the world visited this location for the games, the place had a thriving transportation industry. It was therefore no trouble to be sent to the capital of Pyre, and we found our way to the guild building with little trouble. Once there we had spoken to a receptionist, paid the outrageous fee for me to become a guild member so that I could even make my next demand, which was that I wanted to take the archmage test. That was another fee, of course; but we had brought some of our wealth with us so, while watching those suns disappear as if by magic, it was only to be expected. We were now in a large courtyard dedicated to this purpose, and waiting for the last of the judges to arrive.

“This is the archmage test,” I explained again. “Anyone that is a member of the guild can request their skill at magic be tested, in the hope of achieving the title of ‘archmage.’ Very few can manage it, but I’m confident in my skills.”

“You better be, for all this trip has cost us!”

“Patience, my love,” I told him, patting his arm. “I assure you this will be worth it. Archmages are very highly regarded, and once I’ve passed the test, we can see about getting some answers, and support, from the guild.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“And who are we waiting for?” He looked around. Spectators were filling in as well, because of course the guild would try to make even more money from something like this. As it was entertaining watching a mage demonstrate their magical ability- usually by blowing stuff up- spectators were allowed. It was mostly people in robes, magic users scoping out what the test was all about or showing their apprentices, but the fee was low enough that even some non-magic users were in attendance.

“An avian named Jarnathan, I believe.”

“Hope he wasn’t delayed by any sort of storm. I’d like to escape this situation soon.”

“Humm,” I agreed. “I’ll be doing your favorite spell, my dear, look forward to it.”

He perked up. “That makes it a little more worthwhile!”

Finally Jarnathan arrived, and we could begin. The master of ceremonies had explained what was about to happen, addressing the assembled crowd.

“The study of magic is a long and difficult road,” he began. “And it is not without sacrifice. But it is a road with an end. There is a limit to human skill, and to the magic one may wield. We test that limit here. Before you stands a stone figure,” he gestured to the figure made of stone, standing in the center of the arena, “that has been enchanted to be *nearly* impossible to destroy. Only one that has truly mastered the elemental forces of magic will be able to damage it. Of course, we do not expect a practitioner to know attack magic for *every* planetary governance, and there are as many ways to prove one’s mastery of magic as there are practitioners. We, the judges, will accept any spell that demonstrates a mastery to our satisfaction.”

Right, I thought. Most spells have a sort of cap, where once the practitioner reaches the peak of skill, it's obvious once cast they can be enhanced no further. Now of course adding ambient magic is a thing, and they can't really detect that or guard against it, but any that take this test and rely upon that are just asking for trouble. They may not get enough at a critical moment, and fail to cast a spell that shows complete mastery. Thus wasting their time and money, as they are told to return after studying further. But I'm confident in my skills, and will only add that to show off. I mean, come on, I looked around. They came for a show, how can I not give them one?

"The figure will also repair itself, so please, do not hold back in your attempts." The man turned to me. "And here is the lady of the hour, please give her a hand!"

I waved to the crowd, getting up on the stage with a few skips up the steps. I gave my name for the record and was told I could get started at any time. He went to sit down, and I turned to face the statue.

"I will first demonstrate my mastery of Mercury," I announced. I cast, empowering my magic and spearing the statue with 5 elemental needles, which appeared in a circle around the thing and slammed into it. I had purposefully cast to have them all slam into the body, as it wasn't exactly going to dodge out of the way. The statue blew apart, wind scattering the dust and chunks in a spectacular display, and the crowd cheered. It was a good start! I hadn't been sure, given the statue must be fabricated for it to be "almost impossible to destroy," if my magic would only be enough to simply damage it or if I would get lucky and blow it apart. It appeared the fates were smiling on me.

"Mercury magic has been mastered," the judges agreed, and they gestured to a young girl that must be an apprentice to one of them, who marked off on a chalkboard that Mercury had been verified.

One down, nine to go.

"Next is Venus," I announced, watching the statue piece itself back together. When it was done I cast my growth spell on it, again empowering the spell so it became gigantic. Again the crowd cheered, but there was a slight delay as one of the judges went and cast a spell on the statue. I recognized it as one I knew, the spell to measure things; he was checking to see how tall I had made it. *As again your skill at that spell is directly proportional to how big the target can be. And he's coming back.*

"Venus magic has been mastered," they agreed, after a brief consultation. Again the board was checked off.

"Next I will demonstrate my mastery of the sphere of Moon." *This is one of the trickier ones, as I only know two moon spells at the moment. But they've said any reasonable request will be honored.* "I need a volunteer. The spell I will cast will be harmless, but will need to be timed."

One of the judges accepted and stepped up, while another began the measure spell again. I cast "Dazzle!" on the judge, stunning them, and they timed how long it took to wear off. Again, a bit of discussion followed but it was agreed the length of time indicated I had mastered the branch of magic governed by the Moon, and there was some polite applause. *Hey, they can't all be blowing stuff up.* "Now for Mars!" *Of course, that doesn't mean I won't be blowing some more stuff up.*

I looked over to see Malachite perking up. I had told him this one was coming, after all, and he had been patiently waiting for it.

"I will need a candle and a marking of ten meters," I requested. That was easily done, and I stood a few meters away, making sure my boots were secure. *May as well put a little extra razzle dazzle into this one, being unaffected by the fire.* After making doubly sure no one was in the radius I cast on the candle, lighting it. Everyone leaned forward, wondering how this proved I had mastered Mars magic, but they were not disappointed when I cast again, and the fireball reached the 10m mark. (I had held back on that one, not empowering at all just to make sure I kept control of the spell.) That got more applause, and the judges agreed the fireball *had* reached the 10m mark, proving my mastery of Mars. I noticed more than one spectator nodding and pointing, hopefully speculating how I had survived the fireball myself. The statue nearby had a bit of fire clinging to it, but that swiftly went out as it was just normal fire, nothing special.

"Now for Jupiter." I turned to the judges once again. "Please, without showing me, write ten numbers upon a slip of paper. Fold it in half. I will turn my back, and the judges may verify I have no spells active at this time." I turned and waited for them to fulfill my request. They did, all agreeing that I had no magic going currently. I cast my question spell, asking it what was on the piece of paper, and rattled off the 10 numbers they had written. *As ten is about the maximum number of words the spell will give you, that should demonstrate I have mastered this sphere of magic as well. It is strange, how the Lord has decreed that 10 shall be the numeric representation of mastery of so many things. Perhaps 10 is sacred to Them in some way.*

The judges agreed, and there was a polite scattering of applause.

"Now for Saturn, and once again I request a volunteer," I said to everyone. "I need someone that has just begun learning a skill. Juggling, perhaps? Something that can be demonstrated easily before the judges?" I looked to the crowd and the judges.

"I've just started learning how to use a sword?" one young man called out, raising a hand. "So that I may hone my skills as a bladecaster. Would this be okay for you?"

"Is there a sword master that can be fetched?" I asked the judges. "One trusted to give a fair assessment of skill?"

"I know a guy," one of the judges agreed. "One moment." He cast a spell and talked to the air as if that was a perfectly ordinary thing to do.

Ah, Liv. I'm still broken up about your death. I'm so sorry I failed you...

"He'll be here in a moment. Come down here, boy. He'll bring you a sword as well."

"Thank you!" I called. "I will move on and return to this sphere presently. In this case, moving on to Uranus."

This one was easy, I simply created a block of stone from nothing, and the judge with the measure spell came and measured it, declaring it acceptable. More than acceptable, as again mastery of the spells governed by Uranus would normally create a 1m cube of stone, but the judge announced I had created a cube 1.4m to a side.

"Now for Neptune." *Getting there.* "I will need a knife, or we can wait for the sword?"

One of the judges produced a knife from somewhere, and I stood before the stone statue. Putting the edge next to the "throat" of the figure I cast my elemental strike spell, and slashed it. This put a decent sized gash in the stone, and the judges agreed this was acceptable. I gave the knife back.

"May the judge with the measure spell please step forward? I must ask them to perform a measurement on me, before and after I cast my next spell." *This somewhat embarrassing spell, but it's all I've got.*

"What can I do for you, young lady?" said the mage, coming over to me. "Oh and well done so far. I think you're actually going to make it!"

"I think so too, thank you. Now," I lowered my voice. "Please verify that I am under the effects of the contraception spell, if you would."

"Humm, how would I do that?"

"Please measure the number of days I cannot conceive a child."

"Oh, I see! What a clever method, I see where you're going with this." He cast, and as I had cast this spell four days ago, he got a result which he kept private. I then cast the spell again. As only the most recent casting of a spell (or the most "powerful" whatever that meant for the spell) took hold, he again measured the number of days and announced he was satisfied. He returned to the judge's bench and conferred with the others. They looked impressed, I was fairly sure my result was between twelve and fifteen days, as I had empowered the spell as usual. Not empowering it usually resulted in eleven days. (The extra day, as the spell usually only resulted in a maximum of ten days according to the spell formula I had, I believed came from the "gift" I had been given by that extra-planer being that made Malachite grow that one time.) This marked me as extra skilled, so they were only right to be impressed. *And again the number 10 appears, like magic. Ten days. 10x10cm. Ten words. If there*

weren't Heaven portals one could look through, that would be evidence enough of a creator. Reality would not be so cut and dried otherwise.

"Please continue," they commanded, after another mark on the chalkboard had been placed.

"I will then continue with Sun, and then we may wait for the sword." I cast, taking my time. "Become light!" The crowd indicated their surprise and delight as I become my elemental self, zipping over to the statue and slamming a hand into its chest. While a bit slower than my needles, it did damage the thing, and after just a few seconds fell apart again. I pulled my hand back and dropped the spell. The judges politely clapped, and indicated that a mark should be placed next to Sun as well. I had only one mark to earn!

A few moments later a grizzled man entered the testing space carrying two swords, and I indicated one should be given to the boy who looked a bit more nervous now.

"Simply take his measure," I instructed the swordsman. "Then I will cast a spell, and we will see the result."

He looked to the judges, who nodded, and both squared up. The boy was clearly outmatched, but I didn't let him suffer long. "Augment Skill!" I cast, targeting his ability with the blade. As the spell hit him, he suddenly realized how to *truly* use the weapon in his hand as an extension of his will, and with a few deft motions had the swordsman disarmed. The crowd gasped and the boy looked excited, like he was getting a preview of what his skill could be, should he continue his studies.

"He's become a sword master all right," agreed the man. "We done?"

"Thanks for coming!" The judge that had called waved him away, and he collected his swords while the boy sat down. *Sorry for embarrassing you in this way*, I silently apologized to the man. *But imagine someone of your skill getting the spell cast on them. You could become unbeatable. At least at the sword. I could still beat you as you tried to get close enough to hit me. So magic still wins.*

"Rather subjective, that last one," one of the judges complained as I stood before them. "I'm not sure mastery has been demonstrated in that case."

The others looked pensive, and I froze a little bit inside. *What other Saturn spells do I know? Balk, hard to prove. Communication, doesn't apply. Comprehend Technology. Same. Literacy. Same. Repair and repair lesser. Same. Maybe Power Technology? No... no I don't think so.* "I would need to study a formula or cast from writings, if you would allow that?" I wondered. "I would be happy to do so..."

"Let us confer," another judge requested. They put their heads together and I caught things like "benefit of the doubt" and "impressive casting otherwise" and "don't be so pedantic." Finally, grumbling a bit, the one judge indicated the mark be made, and that filled up the board. The crowd erupted into cheers- a new archmage had been crowned!

The judges came down to congratulate me, and presented me with various options to show my new status. A cloak, a hat, a pin, a ring, all of them finely made and lightly enchanted. Not with anything all that useful, of course, just something to verify the item wasn't a counterfeit. I chose the ring, as I already had the nice cloak from Malachite, and the brooch that started as a necklace. Naturally I had a wedding ring (and thankfully wasn't a widow) but it slipped easily onto my other hand and was made to not interfere with spellcasting. It was a rather plain design with the crest of the guild on it, but on the inside was written "archmage" so it was clear what it meant. According to my new status I requested a meeting of the mage's council as soon as it could be convened, and the judges said it would be set up for the very next day.

"Congratulations," Malachite told me as we headed into the main building. I had put the shrinking spell on him again, so he wasn't towering over everyone, and while he got some dirty looks, no one challenged us. "Maybe now that our lives may calm down a bit, I can get some tutoring in magic and make use of that mana care-"

“Core,” I corrected.

“Yes, that one. The core you say I have.”

“We’ll have to start at the beginning,” I cautioned. “Cultivation. Mana manipulation to empower spells. Feeling the ebb and flow of mana around you to tell where spells have been cast. Reading magical writings. All this before you even think about what planetary sphere you wish to study first, and what spell to practice within that sphere.”

“On second thought never mind. That sounds like a lot of work!”

I laughed. “There is a lot to it, I won’t say there isn’t. But you’ve seen what I can do. Learn different magic and you can do different things. Whatever interests you. I’ve always loved magic so all the studying I did didn’t seem like all that much work. Imagine yourself a powerful dragon in two hundred years: respected, knowledgeable, heck maybe you’ll be mayor of Gloomhaven! That should keep you interested in studying, if nothing else will.”

“Mayor Malachite,” he mused. “It does have a nice ring to it. Where are we going anyway? I thought you would want to celebrate- though I know it’s not your thing to go out for drinks.”

“The spell archive,” I replied, “and we’ll celebrate the rest of the day, don’t you worry. But for now I want to take advantage of my new status. Up these stairs it seems...” We climbed the stairs, and I flashed the ring to the two guards at the door. They bowed their heads and gestured that I should go ahead, though they scowled at Malachite as he passed and started to get up, probably to bar his way into the room. He gave them the stink eye back.

“He’s my husband,” I told them, and they relented not exactly with an apology, but at least they weren’t trying to prevent him going in with me. They sat down again and waved me in.

The room was packed with drawers, cupboards, cases, shelves; anything that could hold a book, scroll or tablet. Strange looking constructs were posted at the doors and windows, and I saw at least one patrolling the outer edge of the room. There was a desk with an attendant, a side room with plenty of space to work on various desks and tables, and pedestals with a large book that was open you could just walk up to. I picked one and walked up to it. On a plaque above it were the directions to how the place operated, and I read them over.

“Interesting place,” Malachite remarked. “Magical security, I guess?” He was looking at the constructs by the door.

“This place houses all the spells the guild allows for sale,” I explained. I pointed to the sign. “This is the directory, you look up the spell you want to purchase from here. The attendant will assist you, after taking your money of course, in getting out the spell formula from whatever form it’s stored in. We then go into the other room, make a copy of the formula, and return the original.”

“You don’t even get to keep the piece of paper you bought?” he snorted. “That’s rough.”

“Magical intent is placed into the writing,” I explained. “It’s not just paper anymore, the writing itself helps to convey the formula to the one learning it. Besides, they don’t want to have to do the work of making a dozen copies of something. Though for the money that would be the nice thing to do.” I sighed.

“What are we here to get, anyway?”

“I’m going to start with teleportation. As fun as flying around on your back or arms is, I think it’s time to simply start wishing myself from place to place. I want to check out all the cult hideouts we cleared, make sure they haven’t attracted any more cultists, thinking we wouldn’t come back. Then I may just browse and see what catches my fancy. Thankfully, while being an archmage doesn’t exactly get me a ‘discount’ on buying spells, Heaven forbid, I can apply the fee I paid for the test to any spell or service the guild offers. So it works out the same as getting any spells after I become an archmage for ‘free’ until I’ve used up that ‘credit.’”

“An incentive, I would call it. That’s nice of them, anyway.”

“Agreed. More powerful archmages improves the standing of whatever kingdom they reside in, and makes everybody safer- because they are assumed to be powerful casters. They can be called upon

for city defense, problem solving, and the like. So to make them more useful, they are encouraged to know a variety of magic. Thankfully I already do, but there's always more to learn." I had been paging through the book while I talked.

"I can see that. This is just a record of what spells exist? That book is huge by itself. No wonder this repository is so large!"

"Now you're getting it, my love. Okay, I have the name of the spell and the shelf number." I tapped the book. "Let's go talk to the person at the desk and have them get it out for us."

Chapter 20

"If your opponent is temperamental, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant. If he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If his forces are united, separate them. If sovereign and subject are in accord, put division between them. Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected."

"The question I kept asking myself was, 'where is the guild?'" I stood before the assembled guild council, the ruling body that kept the guild functioning. *Or "functioning" as the case may be.* There were six, seated at a desk shaped like a half circle so someone speaking to them (in this case me) could be seen and heard by all. Three were human, one elf, one catgirl, and a dwarf. I had arrived early just in case, Malachite by my side once again, and was called into the meeting room at the correct time. This was how I began my speech to them after introductions were done, of course I had put my spell of augmentation on myself to help my powers of persuasion. They all looked confused, and rightly so. "Where were you?" I repeated. "When mages, dedicated to a being from an elemental plane beyond our own calling itself the Gloom, entered town. Where was the guild when those dozen mages attacked our house in the dead of night, forcing us to defend ourselves? That night, my husband," I indicated Malachite who raised a hand in greeting, "was taken from me, and without an ounce of guild assistance, I had to move Heaven and Earth to get him back before he was made a sacrifice to this Gloom. For over two hundred years I've looked over my shoulder. Made sure to charge for every little spell I've done, no matter how needy the person who I was performing it was." *Like that lady with the infested house that is almost falling over. I could build her a stone house in a day...* "Just in case the guild should catch wind of it and take exception. Remind me of the guild's tenants again?" I paused.

"Uphold the sanctity of magic," answered the elf.

"We'll come back to that one for sure," I agreed. "But there's one that's more relevant to my last statement."

"She wants the one about not doing magic for free," realized the dwarf.

"Exactly!" I agreed, nodding. "Despite the many problems my magic could fix simply walking through town, I am forced to turn a blind eye. To pretend a few seconds of work couldn't fix that wagon wheel. Lift that stone into place. Clean up a spill. Because the reputation of the guild made it seem they were around every corner. Watching every magic user to make sure they used magic the 'correct' way. The way the guild demands. But suddenly every single cult member we met was throwing spells around left and right." *Dismissing my cute little ally spells, and who taught them that spell I have to wonder. And did no one ask why a bunch of seedy looking types needed that exact spell? Did they all pay for it, or did just one buy the formula and share it around to all their cultist buddies? Another guild no-no, I'm led to understand.* "Was the guild there in our hour of need? Defending the city? Tracking down how these magic users got their magic, abused it, and summoned foul elemental beasts into our world? Clearly not! Those with a mana core are not so widespread that an area like Gloomhaven can lose two dozen of them and not feel the effects. There's only two professional mages to service the entire town, for goodness sake. Where did they all come from? Has no one noticed mages being corrupted and leaving their homes to join this cult? How many more are out there? Are we going to have to track them down ourselves? Do the job the guild should be doing, to 'uphold the sanctity of magic,' as you so recently put it?" *The Gloom wasn't somehow making these mages, was it? No, impossible, they couldn't have practiced enough magic to be a threat in the time we met Jekserah to the time we went to the Gloom dimension. They were competent mages. They had to come from somewhere!*

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning?" one of the humans asked.

"Very well. It all started with a woman named Jekserah, who we didn't realize was a cultist, or a mage herself. She was trying to use a ritual to turn every living thing in a huge radius around the city into an undead creature. We discovered the plot and stopped it. During this investigation we discovered

the cult, and their research into creating undead. That's all we thought they were doing, and that would have been bad enough. They seemed to give up that research in favor of summoning creatures from various elemental planes, such as darkness, rock, and air to name a few. Probably because they were more intelligent? Or simply because they finally learned how, and started showing their true colors trying to return the Gloom to our world." *Perhaps these were actually accidents, when trying to open a door to the realm of the Gloom they got nearby plane instead. But why were all the beings that came through hostile to us, but served the cult? You would think summoning anything from another plane, it would have to be convinced to help. Was every being that came to our world hostile to us? Why? What did the cult offer them, what had we done to them to gain their ire? So many questions...* "The cult seemed to be everywhere, with a dozen hideouts around Gloomhaven they used for research and generally harassing us. Oh, and by the way, the first mage war was partly instigated by the Gloom, fun fact. Things came to a head when they attacked our house in the middle of the night, and captured my husband. We followed them, with some difficulty I might add, to the Gloom dimension, where we killed a dozen cultist mages and the manifested body of the Gloom. Twice. We returned five days ago. Rested, and came here."

"This all sounds rather fantastic," muttered the catgirl.

"She's not lying," cautioned one of the humans.

"Really?" There was a pause.

Did the beastkin have a truth-telling spell going the whole time? Makes sense, way to think ahead.

"So what do you want from us?"

"I would like two things. First, I would like the guild to do the job it purports to do: help us root out the last of the Gloom cult, destroy or secure any research relating to the Gloom entity, and add questions such as "is any entity working towards the return of the Gloom" to any prognostication that is regularly done. I assume there must be a branch of the guild that asks about world ending threats and such, though again I must wonder where they were when the portal to the Gloom dimension opened and all we had to protect us was a bag of sand and rocks from a very crazed wanderer." The members looked a bit confused at that. "Never mind. I don't understand that part myself, to be perfectly honest. That's what I'm seeking from the guild. Assistance in rooting out any surviving members of the cult, and the assurance that as long as the guild remains, it will be vigilant in preventing the Gloom's return. It's been denied twice, after all. With the most recent defeat it will be furious and working harder than ever to return."

"And the second thing?" the dwarf asked.

"A straight answer. Do I need to look over my shoulder if I happen to see some need my magic can address, and simply solve the problem without wiping out someone's savings? Magic is horribly overpriced. When I went to purchase the contraception spell, Solara- that's the mage I went to- first tried to get me to come to her every five days and have it recast upon me. As if an adventurer like myself could keep track of a schedule like that and not be out of town every fifth day. That would have cost me 7 suns *per year* to have done. A grade 2 spell, taking less than a second to cast every five days, is the equivalent of 33,000 eggs in a year? Yes, I did the math once. Do you know how many people I could feed in a day with 33,000 eggs? A lot." *Roughly 46 people a day, if they had two eggs for breakfast.* "And so very simple problems go unsolved. I'm tired of it. As clearly you didn't care about the world ending cultists throwing magic around to raise the dead and try to kill us, *certainly* you won't mind if I use a bit of magic to improve the town I live in? Right?"

"I suppose as long as you discussed it with the town's mage and didn't cast spells she would normally be called upon to cast," the human in the middle told me.

I snorted. "Did you not hear my analogy with the eggs? No one can afford magic, that's the whole point. So of course they're not buying her services. I have no idea how she stays in business to

tell you the truth. I mean I guess there must be one rich woman in town having that spell done, that would set her up for the year...”

“In any case,” the beastkin put in, “we’re not actively trying to police every town. If we don’t hear a complaint from this Solara, we won’t look into it. So while in theory the law is you have to charge for magic, in practice if you collect at least part of the fee, or keep the solution to yourself, it’s probably fine. If you start having a line out your door because it’s known you cast spells for free, we’ll have to come put a stop to it.”

Why? That just proves my point, that there is a demand for solutions that, given reasonable prices, would be taken care of and everyone’s life would be better. I hummed, considering. “I think I can work with that. If someone is hurt or dirty I can help out and tell them to keep quiet about it, and it should be fine.” *I’ll still get a reputation for helping out, maybe I can just leave forms outside the door and they can make an appointment to see me, so a line doesn’t start to form. I can go where they are, rather than them coming to me.*

They nodded. A bit sullen, clearly this was going against their instincts but they didn’t know if I had some truth telling magic of my own going so to lie to me and say they were noting every little use of magic in the world, it may have backfired on them.

“And my first request?”

The council members shared a look. “That’s more a long term project. We’ll need to find some mages that know the proper spells, and see if they even want to participate in a project like this.”

“As long as they know some useful spells for combat, it’s fine. I can track down cultists with question magic. I just don’t think I should be the only one in danger, or put my family in danger, when the guild isn’t willing to have those *whose job it is to do this sort of thing* do so. I mean, I assume there must be teams of mages trained in disrupting dangerous cults, or necromancers and the like?” *I mean, really, what is the guild doing if not using their power to protect the world? Or not, as we saw with the Gloom, but maybe this will kickstart the process of creating such a group. Some sort of pre-vengers, if you will.*

“We cannot comment on such things,” one of the humans told me dryly.

“I see. Well, I’ll be in town studying the teleportation spell I purchased. I’ll check back in, shall we say three days? Then I can bring anyone you find back with me, saving them the effort. I know right where to go, after all.”

“That would be acceptable,” they agreed after a moment of discussion.

“Wonderful,” I gushed. “Thank you for meeting me and listening to what I had to say.”

I took my leave and headed back outside the building, collecting Malachite and giving him the good news.

“We’re getting some help, or at least they’ll ‘ask around’ to see if someone wants to come help. While I don’t expect the place to be swarmed with mages, taking care of any holdouts, at least they took me seriously and agreed to do something about it.”

“That’s great!” he told me. “What’s the plan in the meantime?”

“Studying, for me, I need to learn this teleportation magic and it’s still going to take me hours to engrave the formula on my mana core. You don’t need to be cooped up with me. See the city! Just don’t get into too much trouble.”

He put on an innocent expression. “Me? I’m hardly the type!”

I looked up at him, towering over most as he didn’t have a shrink spell going at the moment. “Whatever you say, dear. I’m heading back to the inn, I’ll see you in a few hours okay? Come get me before lunch and we’ll go find somewhere to pretend to eat together.” *At least with him being twice as large now he has a place to put all that food I order and don’t eat. It isn’t him just being a glutton, he actually needs to eat more! Come to think of it, maybe that’s where we has putting all that extra food*

he's always eaten for years. It was his body's way of getting ready to grow as it did. Now it was forced a bit in this case, but he will eventually become a full grown dragon.

"See you later."

We went our separate ways, me back up to the room to study teleportation magic, Malachite to go see what the city had to offer him.

For some, studying magic for hours might be a chore, or something to try and get through as quickly as possible, even if that would mess up your chances of actually engraving the core with the formula. I was used to it, you didn't study magic for hundreds of years unless you could tolerate the hours of sitting around. Did I wish at times that I was the type of magic user that could learn spells more quickly? Certainly. Were the tradeoffs worth it? Hard to say. Liv had needed to replenish her inner reserves with a spell, thankfully she knew that spell though I had to assume most that cast in that way would pick it up sooner or later. I still wondered if Malachite had been right about her, that somehow she had been working against us the whole time, but if she had she had it wasn't very effective. We had, after all, rescued my husband and defeated the Gloom. Was she simply reporting on our movements? We would probably never know.

And yes, I could simply ask my question magic "was Liv working against us the whole time?" but then what does 'the whole time' mean? Maybe she was only working against us at the end, because she was possessed. Or tricked into it. Or put under a spell. And what if I asked that question and got a yes answer? Now her memory is tainted forever. I would have to go back over and over everything she did, searching for how it benefited her and not us. It was suspicious she showed up when she did, yes, we all remarked upon it at the time. But if she was a plant, why not murder us in our sleep? I shook my head. Never mind. Focus on your studies. We'll need this spell if we're going to get around quicker once we get back to Gloomhaven.

Hours later, I heard the door quietly open and someone grunting, probably my husband trying to squeeze his way past the doorframe. I was seated at the desk in the room, concentrating on engraving my core, but I looked over, confirming my suspicion. He froze, sighed, and came in the rest of the way.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Didn't mean to disturb you. I can leave again, can you talk for a minute?"

"It's fine," I told him. "What's up? Bored with the city already?"

He shook his head. "I was keeping an eye out for stuff you might be able to do with your magic. I figured now that you got so to speak 'permission' you might want to actually *do* something with all those spells you know. Plus even you need a break, come stretch your legs."

"Aw, that's so sweet!" I hopped up, heading over to him and pulling his face down so I could plant a kiss on his cheek. "You didn't have to do that!"

"I know," he muttered. "But it was pretty obvious and so I thought of you."

"So what it is? What do you think I can do?"

"Part of the street collapsed," he explained, pointing outside. "You can see right into the sewers. I thought maybe your repair spell could do something?"

"That seems like a pretty big job," I considered, tapping a finger to my cheek. "Sounds like a lot of damage to repair too. But you know what? Why don't we go take a look? Maybe I can at least help clean up the mess."

"Great! I can take you right back to it!" he told me. "The town guard was setting up some barriers so people didn't fall into it, so you might have to convince them to let you pass."

"Now he tells me," I muttered. "Still, no city guard would dare to stand in the way of Archmage Spellweaver. Come husband, let us see if my talents can be of use to the city." *As it's clear the guild won't actually lift a finger to help in this sort of mundane situation. They're too busy not figuring out*

when the world is endangered or making sure dangerous cults aren't forming. What do they do up in that tower all day, anyway?

"That means going down the stairs again," he complained. "Everything is so small now. I hate stairs. I have to shuffle up and down them sideways."

"I could always shrink you," I suggested, as we headed out the door and I locked it behind me.

"I need to learn to deal with this," he countered with a wave of his hand. "Before I get even bigger."

Let's hope that doesn't happen for a few years.

We headed out into the street and the crowd parted for us, Malachite leading the way to the part of town he said had collapsed. I was looking forward to helping, if I could. Showing the guild what was possible if you were more concerned with helping people than a profit. *Let's just hope I can help. I guess we'll see!*

Chapter 21

“He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign”

“I don’t understand,” said the young officer standing by the hole. It seemed only one guard was left to watch over it, to make sure no one jumped the barrier and plunged into the hole for some reason. “Are you from the guild or not?”

“I’m a part of the guild yes,” I explained again. *Now that I’ve paid the outrageous fee to join, I’m an official member for a year. I doubt I’ll pay again, my title isn’t dependent on membership, I simply had to prove I had the wealth in the first place to take the test. Once I use up my “credit” buying spells, and maybe look around for a few useful ones to learn, I won’t need their library anymore. Maybe I should head home, my curse is broken and I’ve saved the world, after all. They would probably take me back.* “But they didn’t specifically send me. I heard about the collapse and decided to see if I could help out in some way.” I looked past him, down into the hole that was blocked off. It was fairly dark, but there was a gaping hole here to the side of the street, and that was impacting the flow of people past it. “You do want it fixed quickly, do you not?”

“I don’t care one way or the other,” he told me. “This is a great assignment. I get to be outside, see the people walking around, no responsibility other than keeping them from falling down the big hole. Beats patrolling. You ever been patrolling? Worst job ever, patrolling. Have to patrol in the blazing sun, the pouring rain, the freezing cold. At least posted here I could take shelter if it started to rain. Not to mention the wear on the shoes, your feet hurt after like ten minutes-”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s all true. Well, I will be perfectly safe, as you can see my husband is with me.” I gestured to Malachite, who smiled down at the man, showing all his teeth. “And I’m sure the mayor will want it fixed quickly. Let me get started at least.”

He whipped off his hat, swinging it wildly around to try and disperse some of the flies buzzing around him. I hid a grin behind my hand, naturally when I realized we were going down into the sewer I had put my spell of pest repellent on myself and Malachite, so we wouldn’t be bothered. I would have offered to put it on him as well, but it took a whole minute to cast and there were probably regulations about accepting strange spells, no matter how well intentioned, from what amounted to a random passerby. “I guess I’m only supposed to keep people from *falling* into the hole,” he decided, putting his hat back on. “If you want to *jump* down or whatever, I guess I’m not here to stop that.”

“Exactly!” I agreed with a smile. “That’s exactly what I would say if questioned by my superiors!” *And I was an idiot, who wanted to prove it beyond doubt. Clearly the intent here is to keep people going down there, not their precise method of decent. But it does get me what I want, so I’m not going to bring that up.*

“I followed orders,” he went on, nodding his head to agree. “They can’t say I didn’t.”

“No one would argue that you didn’t follow your orders as given,” I agreed.

“Go ahead,” he told me. “Just don’t get yourself killed down there. I don’t want that on my conscience.”

“I think we can handle it,” I deadpanned. “Come husband!” I cast on myself, “Telekinesis!” and rose into the air, moving forward to clear the wooden barrier before me. He simply stepped over it. I lowered myself into the hole, wrinkling my nose at the smell getting worse, while he simply stepped over the edge, and flapped his wings once near the ground to cushion his fall. “Hygiene!” I cast, touching the ground with one toe. The floor instantly became sparkling clean, so I settled, dropped the telekinesis spell, and cast a “Light!” A ball of light winked into existence next to me, and we looked around. There had been a column of some kind here, part of it was sticking out of the floor but it was in pieces all around us, that must have been what caused the collapse. It would have connected to an arch overhead, several more just like it could be seen to both the left and right of us. Stones and brick littered the floor, but I cocked my head and looked around at the ground.

"There doesn't seem to be enough debris here to account for the entire column," I mused. "But I hardly doubt someone carried it away." I moved down the passage, the light bobbing behind me, looking for tracks or some other indication someone had been down here.

"Watch out!" Malachite shouted, and I jerked towards him as he lunged towards me. He caught something that was falling from above, and his hand seemed to sink into it. "Hey, get off!" he cried. He took in a deep breath and spat fire at the thing, which recoiled and dropped off him as he flung it to the side. It came to a stop and quivered there.

"I remember these things," I realized. "We've seen them in sewers before." I got closer, ready to strike out with my magic if it made any sudden moves. Looking it over it was a huge ball of green slime, about half as tall as I was, and was clearly acting hurt. I didn't think it was going to lunge at me, but I still kept a fair distance from it.

"Stings!" Malachite complained, flexing his hand. "Some kind of acid?"

"Want some healing?"

"No!" he replied sullenly, putting his hand behind his back.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "I'm not going to charge you or anything..."

He looked away but held his hand out to me. I suppressed a grin and cast my healing spell on him. "Thanks."

"You don't think this was the reason for the collapse, do you?"

"I suppose if it was down here a long time?"

I looked around suspiciously, making sure to look up, and gestured for him to follow. With the light bobbing along behind me I checked the area, and sure enough several more of the things were hanging around. Stuck to the sides of pillars or dangling from the ceiling, and this time I made sure to not step under them so nothing would drop on me. The other pillars were pitted and thinning in spots, but none looked ready to collapse. We went in both directions, and found this area seemed to be where they were congregating. They thinned out the further we went from the hole, but there must have been a dozen of them all told.

"Seems like some sort of local infestation," Malachite remarked. "Want me to roast them?"

"If it comes to that, I suppose," I answered with a sigh. *Thinking back, we charged into the sewer in Gloomhaven and started killing everything in sight. To be fair, we thought creatures like these were poisoning the local water supply if I recall? I'm certainly more self-assured now, I can look this situation over more calmly and figure out what we should do. We didn't need to kill those gumdrops back then, and we probably don't have to kill these either. But if they are chewing on the supports, that is a problem.*

"We can't just leave them here!"

"Don't worry, I don't intend to. Let's go talk to the guard again."

"Aw, do we have to?"

"Come along, my love. Telekinesis." I cast on myself and floated back up out of the hole.

"Oh, you're back!" the guard exclaimed, relieved.

"Yes, you seem to have an infestation of gumdrops down there," I told him. "They've been slowly dissolving the stone around here, probably for years. I can deal with it though, but I'm going to need a little more time. Can you keep any repair crews out for the rest of the day? I'll have this solved by tomorrow for sure. But I don't want anyone getting hurt by the poor things, or for them to be killed when I can simply move them somewhere better. I'll clear them out and fix up the stonework, I have spells for all that."

"It's bureaucracy," he replied with a shrug. "It probably won't get fixed very quickly. Someone is to blame, and there would have to be a study on that, and then where are the funds coming from, and who is going to be hired to do the work. They would have to bid on the project, prove they could do it... This hole could be here for weeks."

“Wonderf- I mean, uh, that’s too bad. Good thing I’m here to speed up the process. In any case, if someone official does want to go down there, please just tell them that an archmage is looking into the issue, and will be back soon with a solution.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Thank you.”

He nodded, and we turned to go.

“What is your plan?” Malachite asked as we made our way back to the inn.

“Clearly they can’t stay down there,” I began, “but they are kind of a nuisance. They don’t exactly contribute much to a local ecology, but they are living creatures and so I have at least some sympathy for them. In a few hours I’ll have everything I need to solve the issue though. It’ll be a late night, but that’s what this new spell is for. We can solve the issue quite easily with teleportation.”

“But solve it how?” he persisted.

“Oh! We’ll round them up. I know just where to put them. Remember that crypt or whatever it was that we decided not to clear out? It had a bunch of undead wandering around and Hanz went down there to look? They said it probably wasn’t worth it? Well, we throw these little cuties in there, seal it back up, and wait a week. No more undead problem. These are much easier to avoid, and we can finally see what’s down there.”

“We won’t have to walk all the way back there,” he reasoned.

“Exactly. Actually, you don’t have to come with me. I still have hours of cultivating to do. Just don’t find any other problems until I’ve solved this one!” I laughed.

“Let’s get lunch first, I’ll bring you some dinner but we’re already out and about.”

“You get lunch,” I countered. “I don’t need to eat, remember? That’s an hour or two more studying I can do. I would like to get some sleep tonight.”

“Right, right,” he nodded. “Okay, fair. I’ll eat lunch, head back for a bit of a nap, and we can head out when you’re done.”

“Sounds good to me!”

It was around midnight when I announced I was ready to try casting the spell, and then dumped a bunch of water on Malachite to get him up when it was clear my announcement fell upon sleeping ears. Once he was moving again I took his hand and cast, focusing magical energy through my aura into his, and the room was gone between one blink and another.

“Ah ha!” I crowed. “Success!” *As if there was any doubt.*

“Uh, love?” Malachite said, looking around. “If you meant to take us back to the sewer or to the crypt I think you messed it up.”

I shook my head. “We’re right where I wanted to be. The road into town. I’ll need some stone, and I never do the spell in a town just in case it pulls it up from beneath us. We’ll head...” I looked around, choosing a direction more or less at random. “That way a little bit. I can get all the stone I’ll need, I’ll have to walk it back sadly I can’t teleport objects just creatures? Odd restriction to the spell but whatever-”

“Your clothes came with you!” he protested.

“Yeah, it’s odd, isn’t it?” I agreed. “Things on my person are fine, but not something I happen to be touching. So I could carry a pebble with me, but not the amount of stone I’ll need.” *Maybe if I made Malachite really huge, and he carried it with him through the teleport? Something to try another time maybe.*

“Magic is weird.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you.”

I cast my elemental creation spell several times, bringing cubic meters of stone into existence, which I then stacked up with telekinesis one at a time onto a platform of stone I had flattened out with my sculpting spell. I gathered ambient mana, took my time, and cast “Telekinesis!” on the platform. As it applied an equal force to all points, I was able to gently direct it upwards and keep it level, allowing the blocks to come along for the ride. Thus creating a floating “sled” that I could simply walk past the gates into town, and to the hole. It might take a bit, but it would work.

Malachite whistled.

“You’ve seen me lift a whole pirate ship before!” I scoffed.

“Sure, but that’s a lot of stone.”

Once back in town, we slowly made our way back to the hole, and found no guard out there now, because why would there be? If you climbed over the barrier and threw yourself into the hole in the dead of night, well, that was your own fault, now wasn’t it? I lowered the platform, and when it was at ground level I simply stepped onto it, and rode it down the rest of the way. Settling the stone I went about shaping the blocks into a crude pen, large enough to hold at least some of the gumdrops.

“Now we have to collect them,” I told him.

“I’m not touching them!” he told me.

“It’s fine,” I agreed. “I can get them in here myself.”

More telekinesis magic later, and I had a pen full of quivering gumdrops, probably very confused how they had flown through the air and come to be here. I took Malachite’s hand and gave him directions. “I’m going to cast the spell and hold it,” I told him. “You have to touch the nearest gumdrop. Just poke it with a claw for a second, you don’t need to grab it. We just need to be in contact, and with the pen full like this, they’re already touching each other. So that part is taken care of.” *I should have asked Liv how she did that ranging trick. Something with the aura, no doubt. Extending it in some way so that touch spells could be used at a distance. I wasted the opportunity.*

“I wondered why you were squishing them in there! That explains. I guess my claw won’t be that hurt,” he agreed, looking it over.

“Then here we go!”

A moment later we found ourselves out in the forest near home, and I nodded.

“We needed this spell a long time ago!” he decided. “Why didn’t we have this spell?”

“Never learned it at home, because I didn’t want to go anywhere,” I told him. “So why would I? You saw how expensive it was- that’s the other reason.”

“I guess. Hey, they’re rolling away!”

“Let’s get them inside!”

We opened the doors and threw all the gumdrops inside (or I did, again with magic), then closed the door. They wouldn’t mind the dark, and there were plenty of zombies to eat down there. Their acid would no doubt work on the decaying flesh of the wandering undead, giving them lots of nourishment and turning the zombie into a skeleton, which would break the magic/curse/whatever that animated them and make the place safe. I dusted off my hands as Malachite secured the doors. “Step one complete. Now we’ll head back, and I’ll sculpt the stone into replacement pillars, repair the others that are not as far gone, and head back to the inn for a good night’s sleep. You ready?” I held out my hand.

He snorted. “No more Malachite Express, huh? My wings will atrophy at this rate.”

“I mean if you would prefer to fly us back there...”

“No, no, it’s fine!” He grabbed my hand.

“I thought so.”

Using the measure spell, I was able to tell exactly how high and thick the other pillars were, so while I sculpted a new one to replace the missing one, Malachite shoved debris around onto the

platform. It would need to be “up there” and not “down here” after all, so the street above could be repaired too. He complained about why I couldn’t just use my spell for that too, and I said I could probably rig up a “broom” of sorts out of stone, but it just didn’t work on rubble. Trying to move separate things quickly became cumbersome, so it was easier if he did some of the work. Together we raised the dirt and chunks of road that had fallen, which took a few trips, but finally I could set the column in place, connect it to the others with the archways, and put stone over top of it, fitting that into the hole as best I could. We both stood for a moment looking around, admiring a job well done.

“Magic really is convenient,” Malachite admitted.

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” I agreed. “And why the guild policy is so baffling to me. Let those with magic use it at times like this, freely. How long would it have taken stonecutters to haul blocks of stone down here, shape it, lift it into place, not to mention how would they have dealt with the gumdrops? Killing them, no doubt. A couple of spells and I got it done in an hour. After I seriously started work, I mean. Yes, it took all afternoon I was studying.”

He barked a laugh and I looked at him curiously. He looked embarrassed and insisted it was nothing, but I threatened to get Athame out to kick him until he fessed up, and he finally relented. “It’s that old joke about mages. ‘I’m going to kick your ass... just as soon as I finish reading this book.’”

I rolled my eyes and he smirked at me. “Okay, okay, have your fun,” I told him. “Let’s head back to the inn and get some sleep. Now that the danger of falling in here has passed, others can rebuild the road above I think. We did good. Thanks for your help, by the way.”

“Some things you just need muscle for,” he agreed, flexing.

“Oh my!” *Maybe a little something-something before sleep after all?*

Chapter 22

“To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

The next day I headed back to the spell library with Malachite, looking for the next thing I wanted to study. After speaking with the person at the front desk about what I was looking for, they brought me the formula for the hated “dismiss” spell.

“This was used against me a lot,” I told her. “But are you sure it’ll work?”

“The description of the spell says that it should affect ‘creatures or individuals who are travelers to your current plane of existence.’ You described elemental lifeforms that are not native to our plane. That seems clear to me. If any still exist this spell should send them back home without killing them.”

“I just can’t recall if Liv tried that spell on one,” I mused. “I know she knew it, or at least she claimed to, we traded our spell lists which in retrospect if she was working against us was a bad idea.” *But maybe she only pretended to cast it? This spell seems much easier than trying to kill them, faster anyway, just make them vanish back into their own plane. But we kept beating them up rather than just covering her while she dismissed them. Strange...*

“You charged for it, right?” she asked. “Or traded equivalent spells?”

“Humm? No, no, not the formulas, just the descriptions! I just wanted to know what she could do so I could plan any battle strategies around it.” *I never saw any spellbook she kept, maybe she didn’t keep one. As a natural magician- Though as supposedly a war-mage... no wait that’s probably right. You wouldn’t want your battle caster to carry around a book of their magic, because if they are defeated in combat now whoever defeated them has all their spells too. I should have asked when I went to see her aunt if she had one at home though. She must have learned formulas from somewhere.*

“I see. That’s perfectly acceptable. Keep in mind that even if it was used, if the creature is particularly strong willed, they can simply think about it and not be affected by the magic. So perhaps your friend did try, fail, and then didn’t try again?”

“Wait, that’s really a thing?” Malachite asked. “You can go to all the trouble of casting a spell on somebody and they can just shrug, decide against it, and that’s it? I’ll stick to claws or swords I guess!”

She looked up at him distastefully, but I answered. “Yes. It’s always seemed odd to me but I’ve never questioned the intentions of the Lord. They must have simply wanted it that way. You’ve had enough magic cast on you over the years, my love, certainly you must have noticed.”

He seemed thoughtful. “Yeah, maybe. Never put two and two together though. Any spell that didn’t take I figured was a mistake on their end, not me just not wanting to be affected and so I wasn’t.”

“Well, now you know,” I told him. “If you want, later, I can cast some harmless stuff on you, like my dazzle spell, so you can get a feel for throwing stuff off.”

“Cool.”

“In any case,” the woman went on, “philosophy of magic aside, would you like to study the spell formula?”

“I suppose I better,” I agreed. “Take it out of my tab and I’ll go into the other room to copy it out.”

“Yes, archmage.” She handed me the formula scroll with a bow.

The dismiss spell wasn’t quite as lengthy as the teleport spell, but I would still need hours to engrave it. We didn’t bother going back to the inn, why spend money if you didn’t have to? I simply brought us back home and sat at my own kitchen table studying the formula. It was going to take the rest of the day, if I rushed, and while I was torn between not letting any cult members regroup and get their footing, having this spell would hopefully make our group much safer. *Plus I’m waiting for*

anyone the guild finds to accompany us back here and help make sure the cult is gone for good. Going now when I could go with reinforcements is probably a bad idea.

So I took it easy, joining Snarly and Malachite for lunch, making some more jewelry pieces and small statues for sale, and casting some spells on Malachite so he got a sense of what he was doing to throw magic off. It seemed fairly random, like someone was simply rolling some dice to see what happened, and nothing he could really practice. My spell of augmenting skill didn't take when I tried putting that on him to see if it would help, so clearly it wasn't something he could train. *Too bad, that would have proven... something.*

With the council's time up, I headed back to the mage's guild building the next day to see what they had for me. I had made sure to make an appointment before I had left a few days ago, so they were expecting me and I was shown to the same conference room as before. Glancing around I didn't see any extra people there which I felt was a bad sign, as *surely they would be introducing me to the people that signed up to help at this very meeting?*

"Ah, archmage, come in," said the one in the center. "We have some news for you."

"Give me the bad news first," I sighed.

"Yes, well, the bad news is we haven't yet found anyone willing to go with you and kill cult members. Which is somewhat reasonable, if you think about it."

"I suppose if I was asked to go kill members of a different cult I would have to refuse, I have my own problems!" I agreed. "Is there any good news to go along with this?"

The members all shared a look, which confused me, but there were small nods and so he spoke up again. "I believe so. We're going to trust you with a selection of spells not found in the usual places, such as our own library. We think, given what you've told us, they will greatly aid in your own efforts to destroy this cult."

That took me back for a second. "That's quite generous of you!" I finally decided. "Will these spells count against my credit or..."

There was a general shaking of heads. "We are offering them to you gratis. They will come with their own stipulations of course, such as you not making them generally known, giving them to others, or using them against the innocent. But we did look into your claims, and it seems the area around Gloomhaven has indeed been a hotbed of cult activity. You've been dealing with it, the least we can do is offer you some proper tools to complete the job. This is also by way of apology, that we were not there to help you in your time of need."

Now they had my interest. Free spells? *Unheard of! But then, maybe they do this all the time and those that are part of it really do keep their mouths shut about it.* "I'll look them over, see what you have for me."

"Of course. Come and take a look." He unrolled some parchments and I approached to see what they had on offer.

The first was a spell that I could cast around myself and totally cut off any cultists in the area. With this spell going, it was simply (mostly) impossible for others to utilize mana and shape it into spells. With some effort it of course could be done, because it seemed even magic was not absolute, but it was better than nothing.

"With this, the risk to yourselves would be greatly diminished," he explained. "And I think you see why we don't have this particular spell available in the general market."

"I do," I agreed. "And I think you're right. Drop out of the astral, let this spell go before they can react, and when they try to dismiss my summons or attack us, they'll be in for a nasty surprise." *They rely on magic, the only weapons I saw were those tiny daggers. They relied upon their summons as their weapons. They would be basically helpless.*

“However you can accomplish it, yes,” he agreed. “You would have to study the formula here, and agree never to write it down again, before we would allow you to study it. In fact you would have to sign a magical contract to that effect.”

“Yes...” I answered, thinking that wasn’t too out of line. “I can agree to that.”

“Very well, we’ll have it drafted. Now.” He rolled that one up and got out several more. “You’re familiar with the various elemental attack spells, I assume?”

“I can use the elemental body, elemental bolt, elemental needle- yes, quite.”

“Good. Here are two that are a bit more far reaching than those. This one will create a mist that does continuous, but slow, damage to anyone within. This other one is much faster and more destructive. But as an archmage we believe you can handle it without killing yourself. With the mist, you can exempt your allies from the effects and walk freely within it. The devastating spell you can actually hit yourself with, if you’re not careful. We’ll let you choose which one, and what planetary sphere to learn it under. However, we would like to request Neptune, so that you can perform the spell in a non-lethal manner. Bring the cultists to us and allow us to wipe their memories of this Gloom. There is no need to lose those with mana cores after all, if they can be rehabilitated in some way.”

“Agreed,” I said slowly, reading over the notes on the pages. Both seemed useful in different ways, and I was getting a shrewd idea of how to get both of these spells out of this room. “But I do have to wonder...”

“Yes?”

“They- the cult- may return to their previous methods of raising the undead. A knockout spell would not help against a zombie hoard. So I have a counter-proposal. Let me learn both. I once asked the mage in my town about a healing element, something I could ‘attack’ with to harm the undead and heal us at the same time. She didn’t know any spells but mentioned there was a ‘vitality’ element. I want to learn the mist spell for vitality. You say it does damage, but if that ‘damage’ is healing then I expect it could heal us just as well. Then I can put it in the area, hurt undead, heal us, and exempt any cultists. Meanwhile, I will accept your recommendation and learn this elemental devastation spell as a Neptune spell, and bring any cultists to a location of your choosing. Does that sound fair?”

“Allow us to consult,” he replied gruffly.

“Of course!” I stepped away, letting them huddle up and talk it over. I was meanwhile putting my emotions in the box, to avoid having a huge grin plastered on my face. Imagine! *I can walk into a house of healing, cast this one spell, and anyone who is hurt will simply heal up in the course of a minute or so. No more healing people one at a time, and having it around us in combat- okay it won’t help Hanz- but the rest of us it will benefit greatly. While, like I said, burning any undead and not touching anyone I don’t want it to. I guess I can see why this spell isn’t in the general library as well, despite how useful it would be to houses of healing. Too easy to remake the formula to a more devastating element once you know the spell is possible. Still, isn’t that a bit like ‘cutting off the nose to spite the face’ sort of thinking? Ah, they’re done.*

“This is acceptable,” said the man. “The same stipulations will restrict these two spells as well, but as long as you agree we will bring the correct formula scrolls for your study.”

“Then we are agreed!”

I spent the next several days teleporting to the guild building every morning and continuing my studies of the three new spells. The guild watched me like a hawk while I was in the presence of the formula scrolls, a different mage being chosen for each spell. It wasn’t that bad, as in addition to what I believed their “real” goal to be- keep me from copying the spell or walking off with it- the mage assigned to me knew the spell and could help me master it. This made sense, you wouldn’t put an untrusted mage in the same room as a spell you wanted to keep quiet. So it didn’t take nearly as long as I feared to learn all three and be on my way back home for good.

I met up with the others, informing them of my new spells and giving them some new spell tokens. This didn't count as "writing it down" even if the spell was contained in a symbol on stone, as for one it was single use and two you couldn't learn the spell from it even if I lost one. I gave them both the healing mist spell and the lockdown spell, cautioning them against the second.

"Look, if you throw this down it'll lock me down as well, because you'll be the one casting the spell," I explained. "So only 'your' magic will work, and you don't have any. As a matter of last resort, go ahead and use it, of course. Better I be locked down if something has gone wrong than leave spellcasters able to attack us. The area isn't that big, so you can just carry me out of it if I'm hurt so I can be healed or whatever."

"So what is our plan going forward?" Hanz asked.

"The basic plan is unchanged from what we've usually done," I explained. "We find strongholds of Gloom cultists, and swoop in from the astral. I'll be holding onto the lockdown spell, which I'll let go of the instant one of you throws down the healing mist token. With the mist in place, just in case of emergency or undead, I'll lock down the cultists. If the place is open enough I'll get to work on summoning a ball of elemental destruction that will knock out pretty much anything in a few seconds. We'll have to see what the situation is each time of course. Either way, keep any elementals busy so I can dismiss them, or just kill them if you think you can manage it. We'll take any cultists captive, and I'll teleport them to the cell the guild showed me. We repeat that for any groups, then go after any individuals associated with the cult that are just hanging out in town hoping this blows over so they can restart the cult when we've lost interest. Hopefully there can't be that many left around here?"

"Can magic not protect them from your divinations?"

I sighed. "Sure. If they realized it was the question spell or other divination magic tracking them down. But they haven't put any protections in place up to this point. And the time to do that sort of thing is just *after* you move into an area, so do-gooders like us don't disrupt your plans. Not when your cult leader (or whatever you call the Gloom) is already defeated. But they didn't. We found them one after another. So I doubt they would now."

"A fair point."

"When my question magic returns a no to asking if there are any more Gloom cultists in the area, writings, artifacts, etc. we can relax and hope the guild puts my suggestions in place to further guard against doomsday cults such as this one."

"Thrane they didn't do thuch thingth before?" Snarly wondered.

"Yes, I do wonder what they're doing up in that big tower of theirs," I agreed. "It wasn't looking out for us, or keeping the world safe, that's for sure."

"So when do we get started?" Malachite asked. "I'm really ready to put all this behind us."

Having been held hostage by them, I can understand that sentiment. "Let me get a map. I think the easiest way would be to make a grid on it. I can cast my question spell several times, each time asking 'is there Gloom cult activity in this area of the world as represented by this section of the map?' while pointing to it. Then we narrow it down by going to that area, and asking a few more questions of the magic. There can't be that many places to hide around here. Yes, yes, the forest is big and there could be more ruined structures in there but one step at a time. We can teleport now, I've seen a lot of the area so we don't have to fly, but we still can't move around more locally. If we hit several places all in a day they won't even be able to communicate fast enough to warn the others we're coming." *That's my mistake from before too. Letting them know I used the magical ally spell and develop a defense against it. Odd though, how did they learn that? We only let the one guy go, and that was very early on I believe. How did that knowledge make it to the cult in general? The Gloom told them somehow maybe?*

"A curious oversight on our part to have not thought of doing such a thing before," Hanz decided.

“Yes, well, it was pretty non-stop around here lately, even before the obduction. I suppose I hoped they would get the hint and give up this Gloom business rather than double down, but that’s just how cults are. Until they took Malachite I didn’t want them eradicated. Now I do.” *While my anger certainly has cooled, they are all still dangerous. I don’t want them sneaking into the house for some kind of revenge tour, after all. Pull out the root, that’s the only way.*

“Understandable. I shall get the maps.”

I got a yes answer to three areas of the map and we headed out to the first. With my magical allies safe once again and the new magic at our disposal, I figured things would go much more smoothly now. These final cultists would be the most fanatical, yes, but perhaps demoralized by the recent loss of their leader. And honestly, I could just ‘fireball’ the entire place with my new knockout spell if things were going badly. That element absolutely could not kill anyone no matter how long I left the spell in place. As long as I myself didn’t get hit by it, and the others didn’t mind a little pain, that spell was always on the table. I could heal my family up quite easily while leaving any cultist senseless, securing our victory. Then it was in a pile and off to the guild’s cells for them. Of course, I had to trust the guild would handle things appropriately- and they absolutely did not have any good will built up in that area- but that was on their conscience. We approached the first stronghold cautiously, alert for any traps in the area. The final vestiges of the cult were going down- *today*.

Chapter 23

What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease

“It’s finally the day,” I said to myself, checking over my illusion in the mirror. “I’ll finally get the wedding I wanted all those months ago.”

Six months had passed since I began my campaign against the cultists of the Gloom. We had fallen on what remained of the cult like a hammer, smashing what was left of it. I had the bright idea to request those we captured be checked over to reveal anything they knew about the cult *before* it was wiped from their minds, and the guild agreed. With some grumbling, as supernatural powers- rather than magic- seemed much better at this sort of thing. They called in some people from the Demongate Foundation with mental abilities suited to the task and reported back to me what they had found. We rounded up all written material, artifacts, and cultists in short order. I had asked my question magic for a month straight if there was any information about the Gloom not under the control of the guild, and had always gotten a no answer.

I just have to trust what the guild said, that keeping that information around ‘just in case’ is the right thing to do. So if somehow the Gloom contacts someone here and starts the cult up again, they will have the resources needed to not be caught unawares. I would rather see it all destroyed, so that it’s not stolen or used by the guild “in the name of innocent research,” but they do have a point.

With the cult finally behind us I was able to relax, and start planning our “real” wedding, the one we would invite everyone too. Not the ones who are dead. But Argeise, Orzellon, Alveindros and Malachite’s parents, Solara, my family, Snarly’s whole family, even Ax’rejj the frost dragon and Red Thorn were invited to attend. I was pretty sure Hale was going to show up, invitation or not, so I had made sure a seat with their name on it was reserved for the procession. Many people had made our triumph possible, so while most of them didn’t realize it, this was a victory celebration just as much as it was our official wedding.

I was decked out in illusion, thanks to the disguise spell. I could literally design any clothes I wanted, or look exactly how I wanted, so creating a wedding dress much finer than the one I wore to my first wedding was simply a matter of thought. I had researched elegant gowns and incorporated the parts I liked into one cohesive whole, using my spell of augmentation to help my sense of design. The end result was a gauzy, barely there creation that nevertheless covered me completely, totally flew in the face of gravity or reality in general, and nearly glowed with runes “sewn” into the whole thing. Of course it was a simple matter to envision flawless makeup and hair, so that had been included. When the time came for me to walk down the aisle, I would be ready. The design was fixed in my mind, a quick casting of the spell and I would be the most radiant bride any of those attending had ever seen.

We had spent the intervening months doing odd jobs, looking for opportunities to help the town with my magic, and redoing the house to make Malachite more comfortable. Thankfully, we lived in a house made of stone so adding an addition, raising the ceilings, or making the rooms bigger was simply the work of a few days. Hauling stone blocks from outside the town to the house, sculpting what was already there, and filling the gaps in with more stone was easily accomplished. Of course, I had looked for the services of an official mason, running all changes by them so I didn’t accidentally collapse my house around myself. She made suggestions about load bearing walls, and such, and kept our house upright while I did the bulk of the work. She was impressed and I told her I was willing to do any heavy lifting they needed done, at the usual guild rate of course. (Wink)

That afternoon the guests had all arrived and the ceremony began. Our guests were seated just beyond the walls of the town, as we had to accommodate two *dragons*, but everything was proceeding smoothly. We were about to exchange the rings. Snarly was to my left as I really didn’t have any bridesmaids, while Hanz was closer to Malachite on the right. As Snarly had bought them in the first

place he was holding them up proudly so I could take one, when suddenly there was a flash of light and Hanz crumpled to the ground. There was a collective gasp as the priest jerked away from Hanz, not expecting his ceremony to be interrupted by weapons fire.

“Repair!” I cast, as their body had a hole burned into it consistent with what I had seen Hanz using all the time. *He was just hit by a beam like his own.* Thankfully, having empowered the spell with ambient mana I saw his “wound” closing up fast. *Hopefully they’ll be okay.*

“What is it? What’s going on?” Malachite asked.

I ignored him for the moment. “Did you see where the beam came from?” I demanded of the priest. “You were facing that way!”

He pointed with a shaky finger. “The wall. It came from the wall.”

“Great!” I snarled. I grabbed up Malachite’s hand. *The wall right there, I can see it.* “Teleport!”

“No seriously what’s-” he started to say, when the view shifted and we were looking down the platform where the guards would stand up by the wall. It was flexing as though someone- or something- heavy was rushing away from us.

“Detect enemies!” I cast, getting a result. “There! That remnant we got warned about! Roast him, straight ahead!”

“Do what? Nothing’s there?”

“A remnant like Hanz- they’re invisible!”

“Oh!” He finally got it, and flames from his mouth rushed down the passageway. There was a figure revealed, an energy surrounding them like Liv’s armor of magic spell. That didn’t matter to me- I had a target.

“Needles!” Elemental energy sprang into existence around them, slamming into the armor. Three needles were needed to break it, two more slammed into his body. They dropped, becoming visible. Malachite roared and rushed over there, grabbing their arm with the weapon and ripping it off.

“If you’ve hurt my friend, so help me!” he yelled, raising a claw.

“Wait, don’t finish them off!” I cautioned, rushing over there and grabbing his arm. “If they aren’t dead already, that is.”

“Why the heck not!?”

“Study,” I replied simply. “Hey, you dead?”

“I fun-fun-function still. You defend-end-end my sib-sib-sibling? Yet are an organic? Why-eye-eye?”

“Yeah they’re in bad shape,” Malachite decided, putting his claw down. “Not so tough now, huh?”

“They’re family,” I answered simply. I looked them over. “That’s all the reason I need. Kreager, I presume?”

“You-you-you know me?” they asked.

“Yeah, your buddy Lars- terrible job killing them by the way- came and warned us about you. Didn’t think you would ever show up.”

“Watching for the best-best-time-best time to strike.”

“And you picked... my wedding. Because of course you did.”

“Unsus-sus-suspecting.”

“Uh huh. Well, didn’t work out too well for you.”

He had no reply.

“Take off his other arm,” I told Malachite. “Before we move him anywhere.”

“Do what?” He looked at me like I had gone crazy. “That’s kinda bloodthirsty for you, my love. Not that remnants have blood?” He looked back at Kreager. “Though they *did* crash our wedding... Even Hale showed up in the normal way, rather than just popping into their seat or whatever.”

“Right?” I agreed with a grin. “But no. He’s a caster. He had armor of magic on. Removing his arm won’t kill him, he won’t bleed out like you say. But it will make it that much harder to cast spells.”

"I could just rip their head off?"

"You're sweet! But no. Like I said, Hanz may want to try figuring out where his magic came from. If it's a part, like that lens, they can take it for themselves. Or maybe the guild will want a look. He is clearly a criminal, so some leeway with 'experimentation' is certainly justified."

"You-you wouldn't!"

"You interrupted *my wedding!*" I shouted.

"Yeah, she can be pretty scary sometimes," Malachite agreed. "I'm glad I'm a dragon, honestly. Still, she could tear me apart."

"You say the sweetest things!" I gushed.

"Sick-sick-sickening."

"Who asked you!?" we both snapped.

"Fine," Malachite decided, rolling his eyes. "The other arm it is."

"Great!"

With Kreager neutralized we teleported back to the wedding area, where everyone was starting to mill around wondering what was happening. We explained, made sure Hanz was okay, which they were, and started the ceremony up again. Kreager got to be propped up on a chair to watch, Hanz glaring (at least I presumed as they had no real facial expressions) at them the entire time. But finally we were married (again) and we headed to the reception. We got to open some gifts, accept congratulations from everyone we knew, and generally have a great time. Late that night the two dragons flew off back towards their homes, and the party broke up. The rental company started packing up the tables and chairs, and Snarly came over to us.

"Hey you two," he said, and I noticed a bunch of his family was trailing along a few steps behind him. "Can I athk you thomthing?"

"Of course, Snarly. What's up?" I answered.

"With my family here, well, they wondered if I might want to go back with them. Thay for a bit. Now that the threat ith over and you'll probably want the houthe more to yourtheveth after the wedding."

"You don't need to ask my permission to go with your own family, Snarly!" I told him. "If you want to go with them, by all means. You'll always have a place with us, of course. You can take care of yourself. Go with them, if that's what you want."

"Thankth. Can you take me home, I'd like to get a few thingth before I leave."

"I'll be right back," I told Malachite, who nodded.

"See you later, little guy!" he said.

"Bye for now!" Snarly waved up at him.

With Snarly on his way we returned to the problem of Kreager, and I teleported all of us to the mage's guild building. It was getting late and the person at the front desk was quite shocked to see our group appear in the teleport area, where we quickly hurried off of to avoid anyone else teleporting into that spot and killing us.

"What's this?" the dark elf manning the front desk asked, pointing at Kreager. He was being held roughly by Malachite, who plunked him onto the desk.

"This is a remnant that can do magic," I explained. "Who goes by Kreager. This is Hanz, of the same lineage. Kreager here tried to kill Hanz just in case they got magic too. I guess Kreager got into their head that they should be the only one of their 'family' to have this power. Thankfully, I was there to heal them and chase them down-"

"With my help," Malachite reminded me.

“Yes, they were invisible and my husband was helpful. In any case, I thought perhaps handing them over and letting them be studied as to how they acquired a mana core would be a fitting punishment for all the others they have killed.”

“In-in-inocent of all charges your honor,” Kreager spoke up.

“Quiet, you!” Malachite snapped.

“Hummmm.” The elf placed a hand on the remains and concentrated a moment. “My goodness, it’s true. This remnant does have a mana core. Extraordinary. But if the core resides in the soul, that means this remnant has a soul?”

He looked at us but I had no answer for him. “You’ve got me. That’s what we’re here to determine.”

“Very well, I’ll have them treated as a potentially dangerous criminal with spellcasting capabilities and go from there. If you can wait here a moment?”

I nodded and they hurried off past the door behind them.

Moments later several magical enforcers came back with them, got the story again, and took Kreager away.

“And you don’t have any magical capabilities?” one of the mages that came with the group asked Hanz.

“Not that I know of. How would I even know?”

He sighed. “Yes, testing is always a problem. And sometimes talents simply don’t manifest in the way we would like. Still, there are signs if one knows where to look. Will you be staying? If we’re going to study this magical remnant, having another of their line to compare against would be greatly beneficial. No pressure, no pressure, of course.”

Hanz turned to look at us. “The threat of the cult is over,” they reasoned. “And Snarly has gone with his family. You don’t really *need* me at the moment. And I would like to get to the bottom of this. If others of my line are going to develop this ability, or I can- without going mad- I should explore the potential.”

“I would never say someone shouldn’t study magic, I mean have you met me?” I joked. “But like I said to Snarly, you may come and go as you please. But you too will always have a place in my home.”

“Thank you. And if I send you a message you can easily come to get me. Much easier than shipping myself somewhere, for instance. Cheaper, anyway.”

“I can check back every few days,” I promised. “Or there are ways to get me a message.” I thought of the sending object spell or talking at a distance spell Liv had. “I’d be interested in the result anyway.”

“Splendid!” said the mage. “Right this way.”

“You need anything from home?”

They shook their head. “Not at the moment. I will see you all later. Oh, and thank you for before. Saving my life, I mean. They struck well, I really did think I was about to shut down for the final time. Your magic prevented that and kept me functioning.”

“Not at all,” I assured them. “I’ll see you later, Hanz.”

“Bye Hanz,” Malachite said. They nodded and followed the mage, trailing behind the remains of Kreager.

“I guess we’ll go home,” I decided, as there was nothing else for us to do there. “Grab on.”

Back at home a moment later we both sank into chairs in the living room.

“So your wedding got interrupted again,” Malachite said after a moment.

“Yeah, can you believe it?!” I huffed. “When did my wedding dress illusion go away, anyway? I didn’t even notice.”

“Good thing you were still wearing stuff under it.”

“You didn’t want me showing the entire wedding party ‘the goods?’” I asked with a giggle.

“Those are my goods, of course- wait that sounds wrong.”

We both laughed.

“Ah, it’s just like old times again,” he mused. “Just the two of us. When was the last time we were alone in this house, anyway?”

“Good question! What *will* we do with ourselves?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “We really put down roots here, didn’t we?”

“So it seems. Even though our little family is scattered a bit now, they’ll all be back. And this isn’t the worst place to live. For the next hundred years or so, till we’re bored of the place. We can fix the town up, make it a bit more livable I suppose.”

“What? A whole town?”

“Sure! Why not? More food is grown here than ever before because of the weather orb we recovered. That means more money and greater prosperity. What other magic could we use to improve things? Growing magic? I have repair and stone shaping, most buildings around here are stone. The guild doesn’t want a line of people at my door, but if I just wander around doing random magic to make the town better, is anyone really going to stop me? Not if I do it out of sight! And I still have things to research, like those light and darkness crystals we got. Can I use them in some way? Other ruins to check out in the area, that sort of thing. I think we can get along here fairly well.”

“As long as you don’t become like Hale! A weirdo that just researches strange things and doesn’t make sense half the time.”

“I have you, love. You won’t let me. And I won’t let you get carried away by your greed as you change more into a dragon.” *And that’s another thing we’ll have to figure out. How fast that’s going to happen and if we even want it to.*

“Sounds like this is truly our home. Quite a difference from how we began, isn’t it?”

I chuckled. “That it is. Now, get that scaly tail of yours over here and get a shrink spell put on you. It is my wedding night, if you recall, and we do have the house to ourselves.”

“You got it!” Malachite grinned at me and held out his hand for the spell.

We had survived, our little corner of the world was at peace, and the one I loved was right there. Did I really need anything else right now? *Life is good*, I thought as I cast. *I can’t wait to see what’s next.*