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1
An Unruly Summon


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CHRISTINE
WENDY
MARY
STEPHANIE



Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustration
3. Jnovels
4. Prologue
5. Chapter 1: Summoning
6. Chapter 2: History
7. Chapter 3: Decision
8. Chapter 4: Training
9. Chapter 5: Temptations
10. Chapter 6: Audience
11. Chapter 7: Night
12. Chapter 8: Magic
13. Chapter 9: Spells
14. Chapter 10: Lies
15. Chapter 11: Deception
16. Chapter 12: Complexity
17. Chapter 13: More Magic
18. Chapter 14: Assassination
19. Chapter 15: Poison
20. Chapter 16: Miracle
21. Chapter 17: Contingency
22. Chapter 18: Fight
23. Chapter 19: Admission
24. Chapter 20: Punishment
25. Chapter 21: Good Intentions
26. Chapter 22: Battle Aura
27. Chapter 23: Black Fire
28. Chapter 24: Scrying
29. Chapter 25: Fang
30. Chapter 26: Preparations

31. Chapter 27: Adventure
32. Chapter 28: Purification
33. Chapter 29: Standoff
34. Chapter 30: Report
35. Chapter 31: Expulsion
36. Chapter 32: Treason
37. Chapter 33: Dreams
38. Chapter 34: Visitors
39. Chapter 35: Education
40. Chapter 36: Equipment
41. Chapter 37: Reunion
42. Chapter 38: Success
43. Chapter 39: Death
44. Chapter 40: Home
45. Chapter 41: Myth
46. Chapter 42: Judgment
47. Chapter 43: A New Journey
48. Epilogue
49. Bonus Textless Illustrations
50. About J-Novel Club
51. Copyright



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Prologue

"Screw the dwarves!" spat a well-dressed nobleman from his richly decorated wooden chair. "The damn traitors."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," responded another, sitting across the ornate table. Colorful tapestries adorned the walls, and a plush carpet covered the floor at his feet; even the enchanted orbs that filled the room with light were held in a jeweled chandelier. Nevertheless, despite the opulence surrounding him, the man looked as displeased as everyone else at the table as he continued, "They've taken a neutral stance, no different from the elves."

"They outright accused us of being at fault!"

"Pah. What difference does phrasing make? In the end, whether it's 'We elves are a peaceful race, and have no great warriors who can aid you,' or 'You blasted idiots brought this on yourselves, and we will not interfere in your just and lawful punishment,' they both mean the same thing in the end. It's not as if the elves couldn't have helped in other ways; it was just an excuse."

"Enough." A third voice cut through the others, this one coming from the man in the most embellished seat in the room. Not that the seat was needed for an outside observer to perceive his position over the others; the crown he wore was sufficient for that. "We've been abandoned by those we considered our allies. The pain of their betrayal burns me as strongly as it does any of you, yet for now, there's nothing we can do about it. We must focus on our immediate problems. Without allies coming to our aid, what other options remain?"

The others in the room looked at each other, each hoping another would come out with some ingenious plan. None did.

"Anyone?" persisted the king.

"As far as I can see, we have two options," said Dennis, one of the king's advisors. "First, surrender."

The room immediately erupted, every occupant other than the speaker and the king clamoring at once. However, an outside listener would have noted that although they reacted with horror and disgust at the mere suggestion, their reactions contained nothing of substance; they were just guttural, offended noises without words. Merely empty outrage at the suggestion.

"Enough," demanded the king. "If any of you have a better suggestion, speak up now; otherwise, hold your tongues."

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"It seems that you do not. Very well. Dennis, you mentioned a second option? Continue."

"The second option is..." The elderly white-haired man coughed awkwardly. "Conducting a hero summoning ritual."

This time, there was no burst of outrage; instead, an expression of deep discomfort spread from face to face like some sort of contagion.

"That would be, er, risky," carefully stated Serge—another, somewhat younger, advisor. "There's a reason that ritual is, well, *discouraged*."

"As risky as doing nothing?" countered Dennis. "Fort Graystone has fallen. Fort Mertti will fall within days. We're already cut off from the northern reaches and all the farms of the Chiral Plains. Food prices have tripled in the past month."

"None of us need you to restate our current position in the war," sighed the king. "But Serge is correct: There *is* a reason that ritual has gone unused. People are rarely cooperative after being kidnapped from their life and their home, and when such people are bestowed with boundless magic and strength, things have historically not ended well for the kidnappers. Even if we're lucky and the summoned hero is initially cooperative, would they remain so when we ask them to fight a war that has nothing to do with them? To protect a civilization that is not their own?"

"It's true that simply summoning someone and pointing them at the demons is more likely to backfire than to help," admitted Denis, "but I've been reading up on the historical accounts of the ritual, and I believe that, with sufficient care, there is a good chance a hero

could be steered to our ends."

"Bah," spat Serge. "If you've read anything, you know a summoned hero *cannot* be controlled. That's the whole *point* of them. The same divine blessing that gives them their strength renders them immune to any magic that corrupts the mind. Being complete outsiders, they have no family or loved ones to take hostage, or to leverage for coercion. Just what exactly are you planning? Do you want to break them with torture? There's no time! Threaten them? With what? And how would you stop them from betraying us the first chance they get?"

"I didn't say I thought they could be 'controlled.' I said 'steered.' My suggestion is that we do not *force* them to do anything. Instead, we can carefully curate what they see and hear, so that they do what we want of their own accord."

The king peered at each of his advisors in turn, noting their expressions. None looked happy—not even the one who had suggested the plan—yet it remained true that no one was suggesting any other options. It was obvious that conventional military strength wasn't going to win the fight. Truthfully, the king wasn't even certain the fight could be won with the aid of the dwarves and elves. The demons' declaration of war had come as a surprise, but not as much of one as the competency with which they'd waged it. There was a widespread assumption that they'd been preparing for a long time and had simply jumped at the first available excuse—a convenient assumption indeed, since it absolved the Ricousian Kingdom of blame.

"Then exactly how do you propose we 'steer' this hero?" he asked.

Dennis took a deep breath. "Firstly, we need to create a sense of desperation."

"That's easy," came an immediate interruption. "We *are* desperate, or we wouldn't even be considering this!"

"But the summoned hero won't know that," Dennis smoothly continued. "They will see strong castle walls and ornate decorations. An active city. There aren't yet demons in our street, slaughtering the populace. We can't *tell* them we're desperate. We need them to

come to the conclusion themself. We need to *show* them. Remove the decorations from the western wing of the castle. Make sure everyone in that area of the castle is dressed in dirty clothes. Perform the summoning in an upper-floor room with a good view of the southwestern horizon."

"Why southwest? That's the opposite direction from the demon armies, and it's not like you can see them from here, anyway."

"Exactly. If we could see them from here, we wouldn't need to fake it."

"Fake it? What do you mean?"

"I mean set a few fields on fire! Make some smoke! No one mention it to the hero, just make sure they see it."

"That's..." started Serge, looking for the words but failing to find them.

"Devious," filled in the king. "But what do you do later on, when the hero realizes there couldn't possibly have been fighting in that direction? No, of course—why does there need to be fighting at all? We can just blame the fire on demon infiltrators and saboteurs. Please continue."

"You're getting the idea. So, second, we need to pander to their ego. Give them the impression that we idolize their every word. Heroes have historically always made the assumption that their home culture is 'better' than ours. Their food is tastier than ours. Their games are more fun. Their morality is somehow objectively 'correct,' while we're uncultured backwater barbarians. That sort of thing. If the hero tries to 'invent' a new board game, shower them with praise. Tell them you're sure it would take the country by storm, if only there wasn't a damn war on and all our craftsmen were too busy with arms manufacture to think about pleasure. Same with food: If they randomly come out with 'new' recipes, marvel at how no one has ever thought of them before. The best example is soy sauce, a perennial favorite of heroes. Let them 'accidentally' discover some soybeans and boastfully tell us that it's possible to make a tasty sauce from them."

"Is it? Wait, how do you already know that?"

"Like I said, it's perennial. *Six* previous summoned heroes have all

insisted on making the goddamn stuff. By all accounts, it tastes utterly gross to anyone from this world, dwarves included, which is why it's never caught on. That suits us fine; there's no risk of the hero discovering that it's already been introduced."

"Unfortunate for whoever has to taste it, though," snorted another advisor.

"The recipe involves grains. We can simply claim that they're too important to spare on experimentation, given that we've been cut off from the farmland up north, but that we're looking forward to trying it after the war. But that does bring us on to the third point: companions for the hero. I, um, have some names in mind."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm going to like this even less than the rest of the idea," sighed the king, cradling his forehead. "Keep going. Get it over with."

"Christine Standler. Wendy Windchild. Stephanie Ricousian. Mary."

The first name was enough to raise eyebrows. The second caused some amount of consternation. The third very nearly caused another explosive vocal outburst from the assembled group, and it was only the fourth that silenced them, as the faces of all except the king went blank.

"Who the heck is Mary?" asked one.

"Never mind that," snapped the king, Edward Ricousian, who was still hung up on the third name. "My *daughter*? You want to make my *daughter* a part of this? What the hell are you thinking this time?"

"I must ask the same thing," agreed another of the advisors. "What sort of team is that? For what reason would you dispatch a princess to the front lines of a war? Not to mention that many knights are more accomplished than Christine, and many mages are more...more...*grounded* than Wendy. And who the heck is Mary?"

"It's a harem," stated Serge flatly. "You're not assembling a party for a hero to fight alongside. You're assembling a harem."

King Edward's face took on an impressive red glow at the suggestion of placing his daughter in a harem, his features twisting in a way that would be alarming enough on anyone, but which on a king forecast a high probability of a beheading in the immediate

future.

"Yes, it is," admitted Dennis, which did nothing to improve King Edward's mood. "Again, referring to history, heroes generally end up assembling their own, albeit often accidentally. Since heroes are so strong that a traditional party soon becomes more of a hindrance than a help, we might as well take the initiative to assemble a group of people who will work in our interests. Christine is still too young to have gained much experience, so she isn't among the strongest of our knights, but she's fiercely loyal to the kingdom. She'll keep our secrets, and she's a good trainer. Wendy is so devoted to her research that it's quite possible she hasn't even noticed there *is* a war, never mind having a good idea of what caused it. Stephanie is a talented politician, but that's not as important as the fact that she's a princess. Heroes like their princesses; there's nothing quite like a princess in the party to stoke their egos. And, of course, Stephanie has a vested interest in ensuring the royal family survives."

"You're forgetting one," pointed out Serge, who still had no idea who Mary was.

"Mary's no one. Just a slave I happen to own. But she's been fully trained, she's every bit as young and pretty as the other three, and she's the daughter of two healers and so has some skills in that area. And, importantly, she was in the middle of her acclimatization period during the outbreak of war, so she won't be able to spill anything inconvenient either, even if the hero orders her to."

"I'll admit, I've heard about the thing with heroes and harems before," said another of the advisors. "But I've also heard the thing about heroes and slavery. Heroes do *not* abide slavery."

"Indeed, which is why it's so important to introduce them immediately, on our own terms. Presented with a slave who is happy and eager to serve them, and whose background and reason for enslavement are unimpeachable, they'll have less reason to complain. The alternative is preventing the hero from discovering that slavery is both rampant and officially sanctioned in our kingdom, and I don't fancy our chances of ensuring that in the long run, given the slave labor used in our war camps. Or, of course, the safest option would be to simply outlaw slavery before the ritual."

The advisors—none of whom could claim there were no slaves among their household staff—suddenly decided en masse that the carpet was in need of a good staring down.

"Lastly," continued Dennis, "we must give the hero a choice. The moment they are summoned, apologize and offer to send them back. Don't even explain why we summoned them; the distant smoke will be enough of a clue. Heck, let's see if we can modify the ritual to make it less obviously involuntary to start with. Get them here in a way that makes it feel less like a kidnapping, even if it doubles the mana cost, then ask whether they want to listen to our story or go back immediately. Even if they do show interest, don't *start* by talking about the war. Demonstrate magic instead; heroes always come from a world without any and will be fascinated by it. Only then start talking about the war, and then ask *again* if they want to go home. Make it clear that they can go back whenever they like, should they ever change their mind. Tell them that staying isn't a commitment, then give them a show that makes it clear that leaving would be a death sentence for humanity. Let them shackle themself with their own guilt. Convincing someone to stay to listen to a ten-minute story is a lot easier than convincing them to stay to fight an open-ended war, and once they do stay for the ten minutes, it will be *they* who convinces *themself* to stay longer."

"I hate this," declared King Edward after a few moments more silence. "I hate every last bit of this plan. The deception. The baseless flattery. Relying on an outsider we can't even control. The fact you even want to get one of my daughters involved. It is an awful, desperate idea, and the number of ways it can go wrong must number in the hundreds."

He gave a heavy, melodramatic sigh.

"How soon can we begin?"

Chapter 1: Summoning

"Well, there's something you don't see every day," I commented, peering at the swirling purple vortex that was squatting over the middle of the road. The previous few hours had involved some rum, but not *that* much, surely?

"You say that as if seeing something you don't see every day is unusual," commented the personification of pedantry—also occasionally known as Simon—standing next to me. "The world is full of things we don't see every day. It's far more unusual for there to be anything that we *do*. I haven't seen a slice of toast all week, for example, but I wouldn't feel the need to comment on it if I went home and made some."

"From your flippancy, can I assume you can't see that?"

"See what?" asked Simon, staring unseeing in the direction of the vortex.

The vortex sparkled, and something very distant went *ping*.

"Like, a glittery purple whirlwind?"

Simon peered at me with concern. "How much rum did you drink?" he countered.

"Not enough to cause outbreaks of sparkly purple weather," I answered, covering one eye and then the other. They both agreed that the road contained rather more sparkly purple weather than was usual. In the interest of scientific research, I pulled my smartphone from my pocket and took a photo.

The photo showed an empty road. Where my eyes insisted there was a vortex of purple glitter, the image on my smartphone screen showed only the opposite pavement, where a couple of pedestrians were looking at me with much the same concerned expression as Simon.

"Hmm," I concluded. "Should I poke it?"

"I have no idea what 'it' is, and yet I can state with absolute

certainty that the answer is no. That's the sort of question to which, if you have to ask it, the answer is *always* no."

"I'm going to poke it."

Simon gave an exasperated sigh while I carefully checked both directions, then *didn't* step into the road.

Yes, I was fairly confident I hadn't drunk enough rum to see purple vortexes—assuming there was *any* amount of rum that could cause that—but I probably *had* drunk enough that poking said vortex seemed like a good idea. In which case, Simon was right. If I felt the need to ask the question, I should assume the answer was no, however loudly the rum insisted yes.

"Please... Help us..." whispered the vortex.

"Uh..." I answered, before turning back to Simon. "I assume you didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Someone calling for—" I started, but then the pavement peeled up, disintegrating into purple fog and leaving nothing but a void beneath. My phone vanished from my hand, puffing away into the same purple mist. I had just enough time to glance up into Simon's shocked eyes before the purple cloud engulfed me, hiding the street from view. I had the weirdest sensation of falling backward, except that I *kept on falling*. Vertical and horizontal should be separated by a fixed ninety degrees, yet the sensation of toppling backward didn't end.

"Thomas!" came Simon's voice, but even his panicked shout was muffled, seemingly coming from a vast distance.

And then I finally hit the floor. As effective as it was, slamming back-first into a hard surface wasn't something I could recommend as a method of sobering up.

"Ouch..." I muttered, staring up at a ceiling. That was interesting; the great outdoors wasn't supposed to have ceilings, unless you got a bit poetic and started waxing lyrical about the starry sky. This one was a clean, sterile white, leading to the suspicion I was in a hospital. A medical setting would make sense; healthy people didn't see glittery purple tornadoes.

Then my nose got in on the action and pointed out that medical

settings generally had a rather distinctive smell. This place also had a rather distinctive smell, but that smell was manure.

"Well, that was an interesting experiment," came a voice from somewhere above me. "I can't say I was expecting the mana expenditure to increase exponentially. I look forward to writing the paper."

"How... How are you...still so...energetic..." said another voice, this one interspersed with panting and coming from a lot closer to floor level.

"Oh? Is it not a simple question of mana capacity?"

"Uh..." I interjected, sitting upright and suddenly finding my face about two inches away from a girl's. "Eep," I added, shuffling backward to reacquire my personal space.

"Sorry..." panted the face. "Just... Just give me...a few seconds..."

I was happy to grant those seconds, spending them inspecting the young woman in front of me. She was on her hands and knees, gasping, rivulets of sweat running down her face. She looked for all the world like she'd just run a marathon.

One does not recover from a marathon within a few seconds, and sure enough, once the few seconds she'd requested had expired, she was still panting, so I gave the rest of the room a more thorough inspection while I waited. I was on the floor of a circular chamber, its only source of light a large, curved, glassless window in one wall. The walls were made of gray stone blocks, neatly fitted together. The floor consisted of wooden planks, decorated with a suspiciously runic-looking circular design in white. Through the window, given my sitting position, I could only see the sky. It was a bright blue, which normally wouldn't be a cause for concern, except that last I'd checked, it had been almost midnight—not a time at which the sky should be brightly shining in any color. A thin streak of cloud bisected the visible section of sky.

Wait. The way the cloud was twisting, and its dark coloring. Was that *smoke*?

The panting girl wasn't the only occupant of the room; three other young ladies were watching with varying degrees of interest. The first voice had come from one who was looking at me with a

proud, beaming expression, as if I'd just done some sort of party trick. She looked about twenty and was dressed in an ink-stained sky-blue dress, a black cloak over the top clasped at the front with a darker blue jewel. Her hair was an unnatural cyan, cut short, but clearly dyed; I could see the brown roots. Obviously a fan of blue.

The other two stood away from the circle, against a wall. One looked a couple of years older than the blue lady, as well as a head taller than her. She had short black hair and was wearing what was obviously armored leather with a metal breastplate, greaves, and gauntlets over the top of it. The metal parts of the armor were dented and scratched, but still shiny. She was eyeing me with suspicion, but refrained from saying anything or, thankfully, from drawing the sword at her waist.

The girl next to the tall lady was both younger and shorter by comparison, looking more like eighteen. She had shoulder-length brown hair and was wearing what was quite obviously a maid's uniform: a long black dress, white apron, and frilly headpiece. She also had a thin band of metal around her neck. She was smiling and gave a polite nod when she caught me looking at her.

That much inspection was enough for the panting girl to drag herself back to her feet, even if she did still look like she could use a nap. She looked about eighteen, roughly the same age and height as the smiling girl, and was wearing an ornate white dress. Despite its rich appearance, it didn't seem to have been treated with much care, being creased and grubby. Some of the grubbiness could be explained by the way she'd just been crawling on the floor in it, but that didn't seem enough to explain the mismatch entirely.

Likewise, her hair was long—down to her waist, by far the longest in the room—and such a light blonde that "silver" wouldn't be an inaccurate description, but it was dirty and tangled. If she didn't want to take care of it, why let it grow to such lengths?

She seemed to flinch a little at my staring, but took a deep breath as she tried to gather herself. "You're probably confused," she started. "Sorry. This must be very disconcerting. Will you let me explain?"

"Actually, I'm not," I answered, channeling Simon's award-winning

pedantry as I pulled myself to my feet to join her. "I do not believe I am currently confused. Insane is a possibility I am giving all due consideration, but if, for the moment, I allow myself the assumption that I can trust my senses and my mind, then it's quite clear I've just been teleported at minimum to a fairly distant time zone—but given your clothing, more likely another world entirely. Judging by the state of the floor, as well as your reactions, it's equally obvious that you're responsible and that it was deliberate. So no, I'm not confused, but I do have *so* many questions."

I glanced out of the window again. Now that I was standing, I could see a town spread out below us. We were obviously somewhere high up, which was interesting, because the majority of the buildings I could see below didn't seem more than a couple of stories tall—most were only one. Farther away, I could see high walls, dwarfing the interior structures. They were tall enough that there wasn't much I could see beyond them, only some rolling green hills in the distance.

That "cloud" was definitely smoke, though, pouring up from behind one of the hills.

"Then we'll do our best to answer them," she replied, somewhat taken aback. "But first, I want to emphasize that you aren't a prisoner here. If at any point you want us to send you back, you only have to let us know. Well... That's what I *want* to say, but you'll need to give me some more time to recover first."

"Pfft," snorted the blue lady. "If it's just sending him back, I can do that much on my own. Don't wait for her, or you'll be here all day."

The tall lady relocated her gaze away from me, instead glaring at the blue one.

"First question," I requested, ignoring the sideshow. "Who are you? We need some introductions. I can't keep thinking of you as the blue one, the tall one, the panting one, and the smiling one."

"Hah. The blue one. I like it. Succinct, but also wrong," laughed the blue one, correctly picking up on which moniker was hers. "My name's Wendy Windchild. Seventy-two seasons of age. Enchanter and researcher by trade, and as my family name attests, despite

your observation, it's *green* magic that runs through my veins."

"Christine Standler," said the tall one, who then fell silent. I peered at her for a few seconds longer, but no further information seemed to be forthcoming.

"Mary," said the smiling one, still wearing the same gentle smile. "Sixty-three seasons old."

"And I'm Princess Stephanie Ricousian, the second princess of the Ricousian Kingdom," finished off the no-longer-panting one.

"Thomas Smith," I replied as I desperately multitasked, trying to introduce myself at the same time as working through the deluge of information I'd just received. "Nineteen years old, although how that translates to your 'seasons,' I haven't got a clue. Second-year university physics student. Not magical at all."

Magic was a thing, for a start. I hadn't felt confident making that assumption based purely on my summoning; that could have been divine in nature. Magic was categorized by color, but Wendy had referred to her name, which contained "wind," so perhaps each color was associated with an element.

Age was measured in seasons, and unless these people matured a lot faster than I was used to, I couldn't just divide by four to get back to years. That was a rather interesting difference, given that they were either speaking English or had arranged magical translation somehow.

Also, Stephanie, in her dirty dress, with the unkempt hair and face stained by sweat, was apparently a *princess*. A second princess, admittedly, but still a princess. That was certainly unexpected... Was she disinherited? Was the "kingdom" only this settlement, making "princess" more of an honorary title? But regardless of her exact position, I still couldn't guess what she wanted with me. I'd heard "Help us" before being yoinked off Earth, so it seemed they wanted me for *something*, but what use could I be to a princess? The place looked rather medieval, so were they after modern knowledge? Even if so, there were better people to pick than me. Given the existence of magic, I wasn't sure how much of my knowledge would even apply.

Thankfully, they'd promised to answer my questions, so there was

no reason to think too hard about all this when I could just ask.

"Okay, my second question: What the hell?"

Stephanie peered at me as if she was expecting some sort of elaboration. I didn't give any. As far as I was concerned, those three simple words were already more than sufficient.

Chapter 2: History

"We need your help," Princess Stephanie finally admitted. It really was an admission too, spoken as reluctantly as if she were confessing to a murder. "Our kingdom has been attacked by demons. We've been fighting them for months, but, frankly, as things are, we're going to lose. We need the help of a hero if we're to stand a chance of survival."

"Uh... Are you sure you've got the right person? I'm not any sort of hero."

"Maybe not right now, but you *could* be," she responded. "Hold out your hand palm upward, but close in a loose fist."

"Uh..." I repeated.

"Please, just humor me," she said, holding up her own hand in the same way as she'd described.

Wondering where she was going with this, I mirrored her.

"Now focus on the contents of your hand. Picture the mana in the air rushing into your grip, forming up into a ball. More and more rushes in, the ball growing denser and denser, until there's so much there that it ignites. Then chant the spell. **Lux**."

Bright light poured through her closed fingers, and when she opened her palm, a golf-ball-sized orb of light floated above it. Magic! And she thought *I* could do the same thing?! But her explanation was rather lacking. What was mana? How could I picture it when she hadn't even explained what it was? I tried anyway, imagining the air full of *something*, and that something collapsing to a point in my hand.

"**Lux**!" I tried to whisper, but the word vibrated oddly in my throat and came out vastly louder than intended. Odd harmonics and reverberations echoed throughout the room, but I was more focused on my eyes than my ears; like Stephanie's, my hand burst with light. I opened my palm to a floating ball of light, exactly the

same as hers.

"Oh, you succeeded on your first try!" marveled Wendy. "So this is the power of a hero. Even if it's one of the basics, that spell still took me half an hour to learn. You didn't even have any of the usual background knowledge!"

"Took me a week..." muttered Stephanie darkly before mouthing something I didn't quite catch about geniuses. "Anyway, as Wendy said, that's the power of a hero. Or a part of it, anyway. You can use any spell of any color, as long as you have sufficient mana capacity, and you'll find that as you train, your capacity will increase a couple of orders of magnitude faster than anyone else's. In the same way, you'll find your physical abilities improve by leaps and bounds with only small amounts of training. Speed and strength, skill and finesse, you can push all of them beyond human limits. And as you've no doubt already noticed, you can comprehend our language. The same applies for *any* language of our world."

"I dunno about magic, but my physical abilities certainly aren't anything out of the ordinary," I commented, doubtful of her claims. Yes, that answered my question about languages, and a little ball of light was cool, but neither of those facts would be helpful for slaying demons.

Even if I did have superpowers that would be useful in combat, I still wasn't sure I wanted to be fighting a war. That needed an appropriate mentality as much as physical ability. Could I kill people, even if they were demons? *Were* demons people? Were they intelligent, sapient beings? She hadn't used the words "invasion" or "war," just "attacked," so hopefully they were merely dumb monsters.

"Your physical abilities *weren't* anything special, but the simple act of responding to our summons..." started Stephanie, before shaking her head. "Sorry, but Wendy can explain this better than I can."

"Then first let me explain a bit of history!" Wendy exclaimed, seemingly leaping at the chance to take over the lecture. "In ancient times, when this world was still young, there were four humanoid races. We humans lived alongside the elves, dwarves, and demons.

Four kingdoms were born, one per race, and they flourished. Each kingdom had its own specialty, leading to a healthy trade between all four. Everyone was happy and peaceful. It was a veritable utopia.

"But then the dragons came. They crawled out of volcanoes, the deep oceans, the very earth itself, and wherever they trod, they left destruction and corruption in their wake. From their corruption, monsters rose up: deformed beasts born beneath the earth, forcing their way out, driven only by an insatiable hunger for humanoid flesh. The kingdoms—never having known war before—were quickly pushed to the brink, lacking any sort of ability to fight back. The people cried out as one to our gods for salvation, for what remained of our world to be saved. And the gods answered."

"Stop being so dramatic," interrupted Christine. "Hurry up and get to the important part."

"The background is required to *understand* the important part," sniffed Wendy, completely unabashed. "Anyway, as I was saying, the gods answered. One person was chosen, a demon, and each of the gods poured their divine blessing upon him. Practically unlimited mana and stamina. An affinity for all colors of magic. Physical strength that could match the dragons themselves. The gods created the first hero, and, at first, it was a resounding success. The demon hero fought the dragons with magic, spear, and sword, and he brought to them the same ruin they'd inflicted on us. Legions of monsters fell to his spells, and the strength of the dragons was broken, the survivors retreating back to the places of their birth, hiding back beneath the earth. And the people cheered, celebrating their champion."

That certainly answered my question of whether demons were people, and it wasn't the answer I'd hoped for. But if they had been allies back then, why were they fighting now?

"Of course, the celebrations didn't last long. The kingdoms were in ruins. The land had been decimated by the fighting, but worse than that, it had also been poisoned. Where dragons had fallen, their corpses leaked miasma, and the miasma continued to give birth to monsters. Where monsters fell, their blood polluted the soil, spreading the miasma, and plants withered. Monster meat proved

deadly, twisting anyone or anything that consumed it into unnatural forms, man or animal, giving birth to more monsters. The deep oceans became impassable, confining the races to a single continent. There wasn't enough food to go around, and the people once again grew desperate. And that's where the plan of the gods first cracked. The demon hero realized that there wasn't enough food for everyone and so prioritized his people. He turned his power against the humans, dwarves, and elves, driving them from the small amount of viable farmland that remained, seizing it for the demons. By all accounts, the result was a massacre. People stopped calling him the hero and started calling him the demon lord. Even his name was lost to time, as none but the demons dared to speak it."

Yup, that sounded like a pretty damn good reason to fight. But wasn't she still talking about ancient history?

"Once more, our people, along with the dwarves and elves, cried out to the gods, hoping once again for salvation. But this time, the gods turned aside, disappointed that their people had fallen into conflict. 'Never again shall we bestow our power upon one of you, for power corrupts, and you shall become the very thing you fight against,' they answered. But the demon lord kept killing, aiming to wipe the three other kingdoms off the face of the planet and subjugate the other races under himself, and so the people kept crying out. And eventually, the gods compromised. 'We shall bestow our power upon an outsider,' they decreed. 'One who will fight for you, but who will not be one of you. One without ties or attachments, who shall leave this world once their task is done.' And so the first human hero was summoned, and the hero fought the demon lord. The death toll was great, but in the end, the demon lord was destroyed, and as the gods had promised, the human hero was returned to his home. So many died in the conflict that the reduced land was sufficient to sustain them all, and for a time, there was peace once more."

"Of course, no one forgot the actions of the evil demons," added Christine. "If only we had wiped them out back then..."

Wendy opened her mouth as if to respond, before cutting herself off with a shake of her head. "Well, that was a long time ago. It

holds little relevance now, but I hope it answers the question of why we call you a hero. Since then, in times of great need, when only a hero can save us, we've been able to summon an outsider to take up the role. It's happened maybe a dozen times in the past, when a dragon has reemerged from their slumber, or a nest of monsters has grown out of control and caused a miasmic flood. Or, in this case, when the demons are once again on the verge of destroying humanity."

If my summoning was divine in nature, why were the princess and blue-green mage talking about mana? Was mana required for religious activities? Not that this was a particularly important question, compared to the more obvious one. "So, it wasn't me specifically you wanted. Anyone from my world would have done?"

"I'm sorry if it hurts your feelings, but yes," confirmed Princess Stephanie. "You aren't special. But on the bright side, that is exactly why we're able to offer to send you home so easily. We know it takes a certain mentality to throw yourself into another world's problems, and we'd consider it no mark against you if you lack that. We simply need to keep summoning more 'heroes' until we find one willing to fight. It costs us nothing but time."

She gave a nervous look out of the window as she spoke, where the pillar of smoke had grown since the start of our conversation, and I had to wonder just how much time they had left. Given the strain the summoning had obviously placed on the princess, there was no way they could cast it repeatedly in a short amount of time. How many attempts had they already made? Was that why she looked so haggard?

"I... Uh..." I started, wondering what I should do. Would I risk my life to fight for strangers? If everyone had been living in peace since the demon lord, why were they fighting now? If I demanded to be sent home, and they all died, would I care? Would I even *know*? I could simply tell myself they summoned someone else, that person agreed to help, and everyone lived happily ever after.

Of course, the opposite also applied. Even if they did summon someone else who saved them all, would I be having nightmares for the rest of my life, wondering if I'd killed them?

I took a deep breath. This was no time to panic. This was a time to consider things rationally. What did I want? What were my hard limits? If I was unable to kill someone, even in a war, then there was no point in me staying. It was *really* hard to imagine how I'd react until it actually happened, but I thought that if someone were seriously trying to kill me, I'd be able to defend myself. There was no way I'd be killing civilians or anyone who surrendered, though. Would that be a problem?

Frankly, I wasn't sure I would care if this human kingdom was destroyed. There were precisely four people on the planet whose names I knew. I'd seen a small city out of a window. Beyond that, there was nothing. It was hard to get attached to a place I'd never seen or people I'd never met.

However, back on Earth, there *were* people I cared about. How long would it take to fight a war? What would my parents think in the meantime? What was Simon doing right now, presumably having watched me vanish? What about Eve, who'd gone back home a little before us? Would she blame Simon?

That was a hard limit. I needed to let them know I was okay, and if that wasn't possible, I was going back.

"Can I send a message back home?" I asked.

"That won't be necessary," replied Stephanie. "I'm sure you're worried about the people you've left behind, but you don't need to be. It doesn't matter how long you spend here; you will return only a few seconds after you left."

Well, that neatly solved that problem.

Wait. No, it didn't.

"And if I die here?" I asked.

Stephanie winced guiltily. "Then no, you won't magically come back to life back home, as far as we're aware. But historically, only a few heroes have died in combat."

Only *a few*? As good as that sounded, didn't Wendy say only a dozen heroes had ever been summoned? That was a twenty-five percent death rate!

"Can you send a message back if I *do* die?"

"Uh..." demurred Stephanie, before turning to look at Wendy.

"I don't see why not," Wendy answered in her place. "All we need to do is put a sample of your blood in with the message to ensure it links up with the correct endpoint."

"Then yes, it seems that you can."

I fell back into silence. That was nice, but still, a twenty-five percent death rate! Was I really willing to risk myself for strangers?

"What caused this war?" I asked, deciding to get that vital question out of the way.

It was only for an instant, but I'd been watching carefully, and so I didn't miss the way Stephanie winced again. That was *not* a good question to wince at.

Chapter 3: Decision

"Good question," said Wendy, nodding. "I've been wondering what caused this war myself. I spend a few months concentrating on research, then suddenly there are knights banging on my door, and I stick my head out to discover that a quarter of our territory has been overrun!"

"Allow me," Christine chimed in. "The specific events that led up to the outbreak of war are complex, but the underlying issue is simple enough: The populations of the kingdoms are growing, but arable land is shrinking, and even the land still considered viable loses fertility each season. We've once again reached a tipping point in which we're unable to feed the growing populations of the four kingdoms. We've tried policies such as limiting birth rates, but getting international agreement is difficult. The elves have naturally low birth rates, so they claim they should be exempt. The dwarves claim that their research toward underground farms has boosted food production by more than enough to offset their population growth, so they should be exempt too. Due to the nature of demon procreation, they claim that controlling their birth rate isn't feasible at all. Each kingdom continues to put itself first at the expense of the world as a whole, and now the demons have decided to expand their farmlands by force."

Hah. Even in this fantasy land, the prisoners' dilemma still reared its ugly head. Each kingdom tried to eke out an advantage for itself at the expense of the others, with the result that all of them ended in a worse position than if they'd cooperated selflessly. "Why is arable land decreasing?"

"The damn monsters," answered Wendy. "I mentioned miasmic floods. Whenever enough of them gather, they migrate and bring miasma with them, and once land is polluted, it's lost forever. Even after a thousand seasons, we haven't found any way to cleanse an

area that has been poisoned. I've been grappling with the problem myself, and I'm ashamed to say I've made no headway. The best we can do is continuously cull the monsters and prevent the problem from getting worse, but even then, the number of people strong enough to push deep into the corrupted lands is insufficient. We've only ever been able to delay the spread, never stop it completely or turn it back."

If their fighting forces were insufficient before the war, what were they now? Presumably, all of humanity's strongest had been recalled to fight the demons, so even if they survived this war, would they then have to face a vast monster flood?

"And each time a dragon returns to the surface, entire regions can be rendered uninhabitable," added Christine.

"It sounds like you're screwed whatever the outcome of this war," I pointed out.

"If you're willing and able to solve our miasma problem, you'll truly be a hero in every sense of the word, but unfortunately, it's not the sort of problem that can be solved with brute force," said Stephanie. "To be honest with you, well, you aren't wrong. But that's our problem to solve. Mine especially, as part of the royal family. We only ask for your help against the demon aggressors. We can't ask for more than that."

What an awful fantasy land this was. I wandered over to the window, taking a better look at the stinking town below. After that story, it was hard to see it as anything other than a mess.

There was an obvious plus to dealing with that mess, though—magic! "**Lux**," I chanted again, summoning another small ball of light. Despite my pushing as hard as I could, the resulting light was no brighter than my previous attempt. Did I need a different word to make a stronger light? What were the rules? What else could I do? The thought of getting to play with magic got my heart thumping with excitement.

It was a shame about the price I'd need to pay. Kill or be killed. That was...not cheap.

Short of my death, I didn't need to worry about Earth—at least, assuming they were telling the truth. It wasn't as if I'd obtained

information from a large pool of people here. They could be telling me whatever they liked to encourage me to stay. If it turned out they were lying, it wasn't as if I'd have any recourse. Nor did I have any way to confirm their answers. Maybe I could find a knowledgeable elf or dwarf to check with? Which raised an interesting point.

"What are the elves and dwarves doing in this war, then?"

"Remaining neutral," answered Stephanie.

"The idiots," spat Christine. "If we fought together, we'd have a chance. By choosing to stay out of it, they're doing nothing but sealing their fates. The demons will simply pick us off one by one."

"I don't like this," I admitted. "But, yes, I'd feel bad if I just abandoned you. I still need more information, though, and I'll warn you now that I have no idea how I'd react in a real fight. I might just freeze up."

"That's normal," said Christine. "Rather, I'd be worried if you *could* simply kill someone without hesitation or emotion. We would certainly never allow such a person to become a knight."

"So... What now?" I asked.

"Not much," answered Stephanie. "We're hardly going to send you to the front lines immediately. Until you're capable of handling yourself, it's safest to keep your existence a secret. Christine will teach you swordplay and combat skills, on top of acting as your bodyguard. Wendy will teach you magic and associated lore. I'm sure she'd be overjoyed if you want to try your hand at some enchanting too, but there's unlikely to be time. I will teach you history, geography, politics, and whatever local knowledge you need. I'll also be your liaison, so if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask me. And finally, Mary will act as your personal assistant, taking care of food, clothing, chores, or any *other* needs you might have. She also has a mild affinity for white magic and is able to cast lower-class healing spells. Frankly, I'd rather have a fully qualified healer attached to you on top of Christine, but certified healers are too valuable to spare right now, and we have no reason to believe information about your summoning has leaked. We aren't expecting assassination attempts, and Mary will be sufficient to deal with

training accidents and suchlike."

Wow... Shit just got real. The thoughts I'd had about her weird inflection on "other" were blown away by the casual mention of assassination. I hadn't even *considered* assassination attempts. I'd said I didn't have enough information, and that was a definite point against. I looked over at Mary, who, besides her five-word introduction, hadn't said a word throughout the entire conversation. Her expression had barely even changed, despite the heavy topics; she was still smiling gently. Catching me looking, she gave a curtsy, spreading the skirt of her black-and-white dress as she dipped her knees and bowed her head.

"I look forward to serving you, Master," she said, and this time it was the thoughts on assassination that were immediately shunted to the back of my mind as my eyes fixed on the metal collar she was wearing.

"Huh?" she asked, catching my gaze. The smile finally gave way to an expression of confusion. "Is something wrong?"

I'd spotted the collar the first time I'd looked at her, but I wasn't about to question the local fashion. Coupled with her calling me "master," though, I was starting to get suspicious. Perhaps that was just what local culture dictated maids call those whom they served, but in the corner of my vision I spotted Stephanie tense up, her expression turning even more nervous than when I'd asked for the cause of the war. That was evidence enough for me that something was up.

"Please tell me what purpose that collar serves."

"Oh, this?" asked Mary, tapping it. "It's just my slave collar."

"I changed my mind," I said, turning back to Stephanie. "I'm going home."

"Wha?" gasped Mary, panicking. "What happened? Did I do something to displease you, Master? What did I do wrong?"

"I... What...? *Why?*" stammered the princess, apparently completely blindsided by my sudden about-face. To her credit, she collected herself quickly, but for a moment she'd shown as much panic as Mary. "Okay, but please can you tell us why you've changed your mind?"

"Isn't it obvious? You keep *slaves*!"

"Would you rather she was left on the streets to starve?" asked Christine, raising an eyebrow.

"What? Why would she starve?"

"Mary?" asked Stephanie, ceding the floor to the still-panicking slave. "Please fill him in on the details of your status."

"Y-Yes! My family ran a small clinic on the outskirts of the capital, but it ended up a victim of the church's universal healing initiative," she declared without even taking a breath. "We needed to pay off loans, and because of my age, I was the most valuable family member, so I volunteered!"

"I think you've skipped a lot of important details there," I grumbled, but the poor girl was obviously still flustered, apparently blaming herself for costing her kingdom a hero. Her family had been driven out of business by the church? It came as no surprise that there *was* a church, since Wendy had already directly referenced gods. Given the outline, I could guess they'd started up some scheme to provide free healing for all, and it had driven commercial healers out of business, but I failed to see how that was any sort of valid excuse.

"If I may," added Christine, who remained very much unflustered. "Nineteen seasons ago, the church launched the universal healing initiative, providing free healing magic for all who required it. As a natural consequence, established healers lost their businesses because there was no way for them to compete. That was an obvious and foreseeable outcome, so the church took steps to mitigate it by offering ordination to any affected healer, bringing them into the church's ranks. Many took up the offer, but others were disinclined to accept the cut to their income that such a move would entail. Of the group that didn't join the church, most changed careers or joined the army, but a minority refused to believe the church's initiative was sustainable and thought they could wait it out. Mary's parents were a part of that group, and they took out extensive loans to cover operating costs, expecting to repay them when business picked back up. It never did, and by that point, they were stuck. The church was still willing to take them on, but they

wouldn't pay off the loans, and the debt had grown beyond the point that could be covered by the salary of a church healer. With no means of repayment on the horizon, the creditors began legal proceedings to seize Mary's parents and their property. Such an action would have left Mary and her younger brother to fend for themselves, without a home. Mary *could* have joined the church as an apprentice healer, but her brother was too young for employment, nor would the church house the family of a mere apprentice, so this was the decision she reached to protect her family. I know you come from a different culture, but if you'll forgive my rudeness, please don't use that as an excuse to belittle her sacrifice."

I treated Christine to my best glare. Belittle her sacrifice? Of course I wasn't! Mary was the victim here, not someone I had any intention of blaming! What sort of society *let* someone sell themselves to pay off a loan? If the church could afford to give free healing to everyone, surely society could have some sort of basic state welfare?

And I couldn't help but note that Christine had given that entire spiel without once using the word "slave."

"And why do you wear a collar?" I asked.

"I have to! It's the law!" Mary fired back, still launching her words at a hundred miles an hour. "Do you not like it? This is just a basic one, but they come in a range of styles and colors! I could change it!"

And then she took it off, holding it out toward me as if expecting me to inspect it.

"Uh..." I commented, not having expected that. I'd seen "slave" and "metal collar," and perhaps had jumped to some unwarranted conclusions, like it being an evil mind-control device. But she had just taken it off, all on her own, and no one in the room had batted an eyelid. Now that I could see the whole thing, it had a simple catch on the back, with hinges on either side. There didn't even seem to be any means of locking it. "So it's just, uh, something that signifies that you're a slave? It doesn't force you to obey orders?"

She shook her head madly.

"Using any sort of magic that overrides free will against *any* sapient, slave or free, human or otherwise, is a serious crime," explained Stephanie. "No exceptions. Not even against demons."

"If the idea of people selling themselves for money disgusts you, I'll add that since the outbreak of war, the practice has actually been suspended," added Christine. "Not by law, but because of simple market forces. There are laws about the treatment of slaves, including the requirement to feed them, and in the current climate... Let's just say that the supply of willing volunteers has started to vastly outstrip demand. For a brief period before the suspension, people had to *pay* to enslave themselves. Things have reached the point that enslavement is rarely even used as a criminal punishment, due to the incentive it was giving the poorer citizens to commit petty crimes."

"Seriously?" asked Wendy. "Things are that bad? Sheesh, I really need to get out of my lab more."

"Seriously" was right. That was utterly ridiculous. Slavery had been banned not out of any sort of morality concerns, but because they had too many people who *wanted* to be slaves? What sort of state was this country in for the people to be *that* desperate? People selling themselves just for the chance to eat?

Drat. I looked around the room. Mary, who'd put her collar back on, was watching me with fearful eyes, still obviously blaming herself. Christine seemed as steady as always. Wendy looked surprised, apparently not having known how bad things were.

But Princess Stephanie was the worst. She was a bundle of nerves, a mix of hope and fear evident as she waited for my next words.

Dammit. I still didn't like this. This kingdom was obviously not squeaky clean, but I had to admit Earth wasn't either. I had the distinct impression they hadn't given me complete answers to a few of my questions, and the way Christine had brushed off the exact cause of the war as "complex" without offering any explanation hadn't escaped my notice, but if they weren't planning to send me to the front lines immediately, I had the chance to do my own research before I did anything I couldn't take back. Besides, if they weren't

being honest with me, how could I trust them to send me home?

That applied even if their reasoning was purely practical rather than malicious, given the state the princess had been left in. I had no reason to believe sending me back was any easier than summoning me. If I turned out to be no use, wasn't there a chance I'd be killed, rather than sent home, so that a replacement could be summoned quicker? Even if I didn't want to help them, it would be safer to stick around and learn the spell to send myself home than to admit my unwillingness to them here.

But if they were being truthful—and to some extent, perhaps even if they weren't—if I wanted to do some good and improve lives, whoever's lives they were, wouldn't I have a better chance here, where I apparently had a bunch of gods backing me, than back on Earth where I was just a bog-standard powerless university student?

"Fine. I'll stay. For now."

Chapter 4: Training

Stephanie Ricousian, second princess of the Ricousian Kingdom, stalked down the corridors of the royal palace, her hurried footsteps echoing off the bare stone walls. After numerous twists and turns, she reached the guarded doors that separated the western wing from the main building. The pair of knights on duty saluted, then pushed open the doors. Stephanie stepped through without stopping, but she did at least spare the guards a thankful nod. The sound of her footsteps cut out as she stepped through, moving from the bare wood to plush carpet.

It took several more branches and staircases until she reached another guarded door. Once more, a pair of knights pushed the doors open, and she stepped through into the conference room beyond.

A few of the occupants struggled to mask their disgust at her appearance, but they at least managed to hold their tongues. They all understood the reasons for it, however much it offended their noble sensibilities. Besides, insulting a princess while her doting father was in the room wouldn't have been a great career move.

"Report," demanded her father, King Edward Ricousian. "Were we successful?"

"There are reasons for both optimism and pessimism," she answered.

"Dammit. Give us a straight answer!" snapped Serge. "Will the hero fight for us or not?"

"It is..." She hesitated. "It's difficult to say."

"Please explain," requested the king, his voice softer. "We knew this was a risky plan, and there's no harm in treating this first attempt as a trial run. What worked and what didn't?"

"Our attempts to mask our wealth have been successful so far. Likewise, we were able to convince him of our desperation. As

planned, we were able to shift him from not knowing us at all to being willing to fight for us by moving in small steps. His obvious interest in magic helped. Furthermore, he had a very strong response toward Mary, and I believe he's already emotionally invested in her protection and well-being. That same response fully displayed the egotistical 'my society is better than yours' view that Minister Dennis predicted, although we've yet to have an opportunity to exploit it."

"Saying 'willing to fight for us' makes it sound as if he's already on board. What are the reasons for pessimism?"

"Firstly, he seemed nervous and not strongly committed. I'm worried that even quite a small incident could cause him to change his mind. Secondly, he's shown no sexual interest in any of his group of handlers, although I'll admit it wasn't really the situation for it and perhaps we'll have more luck later. Third is my own personal failing; I lack Christine's impressive stoicism or Wendy's and Mary's ignorance of current events, and I'm concerned he's picked up more from my emotions than we would have liked and now harbors suspicions that we've not been completely honest. Finally, I've already mentioned his strong response toward Mary. His reaction to her admission that she was a slave was even more extreme than predicted. As planned, we managed to placate him by explaining her circumstances, but in the process, it was implied that slave collars are mere identification with no other function. We didn't explicitly lie to him, but even so, when he finds out how they really work, I can't predict what will happen."

King Edward steepled his fingers, resting his chin in his hands. "And your decision?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"Your decision. Is he usable? If we start training him, he'll quickly exceed the level at which we'll be able to dispose of him without casualties, nor will we have time to train another hero if we delay further. You're the one with the firsthand experience, so you must make the call. Either we continue with his training and put our survival fully in his hands, or else we have him terminated immediately and summon another *today*."

Stephanie stared at her father in silence. Whatever thoughts were running through her head were known to her alone, but eventually she once again spoke. "He's usable. I'll *make* him usable."

I'd started this adventure with the flippant words "There's something you don't see every day." Simon had told me that wasn't unusual, and while events since had proven him right, I couldn't help but feel that those events hadn't quite been what he'd had in mind.

For example, standing in a dusty courtyard in the shadow of an enormous castle wasn't something I did every day. Nor was padded leather my usual choice of clothing; Christine had dug through their stores and found some light armor that proved a decent fit. A light wooden buckler was strapped to one arm, and in the hand of my other I held a wooden sword; neither was my usual choice of accessory.

Opposite me stood Christine, still in the same armor she'd been wearing in the summoning chamber. Her real sword was still sheathed at her side, and instead she held the same sort of wooden sword as I did. Regardless of the material of her sword, the fact was that someone wielding any sort of weapon wasn't something I saw every day. Even less so when the weapon was pointed at *me*.

Mary—who had regained her composure once I agreed to stay and was once more wearing her gentle smile—watched from the sidelines. She'd energetically promised to take care of any bruises or scrapes I picked up, which, while nice, wasn't exactly reassuring. I'd rather not get injured in the first place!

Wendy and Stephanie weren't around, Wendy having departed to prepare materials for my first magic lesson tomorrow, and Stephanie off doing nondescript princess stuff.

"Okay, let's begin with the basics," said Christine, beginning my first combat lesson. "If you were anyone else, I'd spend a week going over stances, grips, and positioning before even letting you hold a weapon. Heck, I'd have you running laps just to get you used to moving in armor. But you're not 'anyone.' You are a *hero*. In your world, you may be no one special, but in this one you *are*. You don't need any of that crap. Trust in your instincts and feelings, and let

them guide your movements. Now, come at me."

"Uh... Full marks for the pep talk, but saying 'Come at me' isn't much of a lesson," I muttered. "What part of that is the basics?"

"Oh? Would you rather *I* came at *you*?" she responded, and for an instant, her usual stoic expression was replaced with a smirk.

And then she *blurred*.

"The hell?!" I exclaimed as I desperately tried to bring my buckler up between us, but she'd crossed the distance faster than I could react, and her wooden blade was already swinging downward. I caught it on the edge of my shield, but the impact threw me from my feet, and I tumbled backward.

"Are you okay?" called Mary.

"I think so," I answered, climbing back to my feet, only to see that Christine's expression had changed again. This time, she was showing clear shock. She'd gone all day without showing emotion, and then two showed up at once.

"'*The hell?*' Those should be *my* words! What did you just *do*?"

"Uh... Tried to block you and failed?" I answered, wondering why the knight was suddenly so flustered. I hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, had I?

"This must be how Wendy felt when you cast Lux on your first try." She sighed, shaking her head. "Mary, from your point of view, what just happened?"

"Uh... I didn't really see much. You were standing over there, and then you vanished. Then you were standing where Master was, and Master was on the floor."

"Exactly. I just used my full speed, employing a technique called 'body strengthening' that circulates mana internally to boost my perception and physical abilities. Someone untrained shouldn't even have been able to see me move, yet you not only could, but you very nearly blocked my strike."

She'd just done something pretty scary to someone who'd never held a weapon before, then. I hadn't had the chance to think at the time, but it was obvious her movements had been way beyond natural human limits. And despite that, *I'd nearly blocked it*. Then, if I managed to do that circulation thingy... A small smile might have

leaked onto my face as I remembered the feeling of casting Lux, directing mana into the palm of my hand, but this time, I imagined it circulating through my body. Pushing my muscles beyond human limits.

"My turn," I declared, and took a step forward.

I barely even felt the impact of my face hitting the floor, too distracted by every single muscle in my body suddenly feeling as if it were on fire.

"Master!" I heard Mary shout, followed by hurried footsteps as she rushed over.

"What? Hey!" exclaimed Christine, dropping her sword and rushing over too. "What was *that*?"

I tried to answer, but my body refused to take orders. I couldn't so much as twitch a finger.

In retrospect, perhaps trying to replicate her body strengthening trick with zero instruction had been a foolish move.

"**Parvus Sanatio**," spoke Mary, the odd harmonics of a spell invocation echoing around the courtyard. Warmth flooded my body, dulling the terrible burning sensations. "**Parvus Sanatio**, **Parvus Sanatio**, **Parvus Sanatio**!"

"Thanks," I mumbled, her repeated healing restoring my ability to speak. "But—ugh—if it's all the same to you, I think I'll lie here a while longer."

"What happened?" demanded Christine.

"I tried to circulate mana internally, like you described. Yes, I know. That was probably a stupid idea."

"That— That—" stuttered Christine, once again letting emotion into her life. "That was *beyond* stupid! You could have ruptured your heart! Snapped every bone in your body! Torn your muscles to shreds! Body strengthening isn't exactly a high-level technique, but that doesn't mean you can just indiscriminately flood your body with mana and expect everything to work out. You need to carefully match your increased power with increased endurance to ensure your body can withstand the forces. It needs to be carefully balanced throughout your body, so you don't have one leg pushing harder than the other. That sort of thing."

She paused her explanation of just how much of an idiot I was to peer questioningly at Mary.

"I've done what I can, but I don't have the mana capacity to fully heal the damage. He needs bed rest," Mary answered, not needing words to know what Christine was asking.

"So much for today's training session. We don't have time to waste like this... But perhaps we can take advantage of it. Mary, you might not be able to draw on much mana, but *he* can apparently pull in plenty. Enough to cripple himself with, at least. Teach him Parvus Sanatio and let him get *himself* back on his feet."

"Okay!" she happily agreed. As content as she seemed to simply stand around doing nothing, she approached any task she was given with enthusiasm. "Picture a body in a perfect, healthy state. As detailed as possible: bones, blood vessels, nerves, muscles, organs, skin. Everything. The finer the detail and more accurate the picture, the more efficient the spell. Then picture the mana rushing into your body, healing your body back into that perfect state, and chant the name of the spell. Oh, you do know what things like nerves are, right?"

"Yes," I confirmed, wondering why there were limits to the amount of mana we could use when the spell images involved picturing mana rushing in from outside. That was a question best asked in my magic lesson, though, so I did as I was told. The only issue was the level of detail I could manage. It wasn't as if I was a doctor, and while high school biology had covered a decent amount of basic anatomy, it had been a couple of years ago. Long gone were the days in which I could confidently label a dozen different components of an eye and name every major bone in the body. Nevertheless, I did my best.

"Parvus **Sanatio**," I intoned. "Huh?"

The lingering burning sensation vanished completely, but I was too distracted by the spell invocation to pay it much mind. I was fairly sure that hadn't been quite right...

"Did he just...?" asked Christine.

Mary nodded.

"Fine. I don't care anymore. Apparently, *accidentally* casting

spells of higher classes than intended is a thing heroes can do now. Are you fully healed?”

“I, um, think so? What just happened?”

“You cast a standard-class healing spell instead of the lower one.”

“The image is similar; it just requires more detail,” explained Mary. “And the spell name is just the second word of the lower version, so I suppose it’s possible to mix the two up if you accidentally put more detail into the image than needed. And if your mana capacity is broad enough. Mine isn’t, or I’d be a much better healer...”

Huh. Apparently high school biology was good for something after all.

“Well, since you’re all healed, we might as well continue our lesson,” said Christine. “Can you stand?”

I made the attempt, but the answer turned out to be no. “Ouch,” I said, after my face met earth for a second time.

“I thought you said you were fully healed?”

“I thought I was, but when I stood up, I felt really dizzy and nauseous. And now I’m cold.”

Despite the warm air and my padded armor, which wasn’t exactly the most airy outfit I could have worn, I could feel goose bumps breaking out all over.

“Huh, well, will you look at that. Apparently, our genius hero doesn’t have an infinite mana capacity after all. Mary, could you fetch a mana potion please? Let’s get one of those down his throat, and then maybe we can finally resume our training.”

Mary went running off with her trademark enthusiasm, digging into a pile of equipment we’d stacked up at the side of the courtyard beforehand.

“Just to warn you, they taste *really* bad,” continued Christine, once the pair of us were left alone. There was an unreadable expression on her face; I had no idea if she was gloating, or remembering the taste of one herself. “Hopefully, the foulness will remind you to not be quite so foolish in the future.”

Chapter 5: Temptations

I managed to get through the rest of the training session without crippling myself again, even if I did devote far too much of my thought process toward very carefully not picturing mana doing anything whatsoever. It helped that Christine refrained from any further superhuman exploits I might have been tempted to copy.

Despite her warning, the mana potion hadn't tasted *that* bad. It had the texture and taste of one of the worse sorts of smoothies, the type you get by blending together too many green things like cucumber and lettuce. It was even *colored* green, instead of the blue of a stereotypical mana potion.

"You were so cool, Master!" exclaimed Mary as we walked back into the castle.

"That display was certainly impressive," agreed Christine. "You already exceed my baseline strength, and equal me in dexterity and speed."

"I didn't land a single blow on you!"

"I have many seasons of experience. I'm more than capable of bolstering my lacking strength with skill. But even so, you're picking up skill just as quickly too. At your rate of improvement, a few more sessions and I'll likely no longer be your match without resorting to body strengthening or other techniques."

"Other techniques?"

"I'll teach you when you're ready. If I give examples now, there's a dangerous possibility you'll decide to test them out in bed, or something equally stupid."

"Sorry..." I mumbled.

"Master isn't stupid!" pouted Mary, acting cute.

"Umm... Mary, can you please call me by name? Not 'master'—I have no intention of being anyone's master."

"Of course, if that's what you want." She nodded. "Hmm... Mr.

Smith? Thomas? Tom?”

“Not Mr. Smith. It makes me sound too old. Possibly some sort of middle-aged secret agent.”

“Tom, then!”

I shook my head in exasperation. The girl seemed far too happy and energetic given her situation, in my opinion, but it wasn’t as if I had a full understanding of her life. I certainly wasn’t about to convince her she had no right being happy and should be all gloomy and depressed instead.

We entered a spartan changing room—little more than a few benches and some shelving—where Mary helped me get the armor off, just like she’d helped me get it on. As embarrassing as it was having a girl my own age help me get dressed, the equipment wasn’t as easy to pull on or off as a T-shirt. Still, I carefully noted which straps went where and was fairly sure I’d be able to manage it myself tomorrow.

More embarrassing was Christine, who was standing around watching.

“Do you have to stare at me in my underwear?” I complained.

“I’m your bodyguard. I would be a poor bodyguard if I left your side.”

“Doesn’t mean you need to stare.”

Christine obligingly turned her back.

“Most boys your age would be happy to be in a closed room with multiple girls and not enough clothing,” came another voice: Princess Stephanie sweeping into the room without so much as knocking first and treating me to the sort of stare that on Earth would be likely to trigger police involvement.

I quickly pulled on my jeans, much to her apparent disappointment.

“So, how did the training go?” she asked, as if she hadn’t just...whatever it was she’d just done.

“His abilities exceed expectations, but he’s lacking common sense,” tersely replied Christine.

“Lacking common sense?” asked Stephanie.

“Nothing to be concerned about. He is simply too eager in some

respects."

"I see..." said Stephanie, who obviously didn't. "In that case, I came down to invite you to dinner. My father would like to meet you."

"Your father?" I asked, my brain quickly running through the logic. It didn't take long; there weren't exactly many steps. "The king?"

"The one and only. Really, given your importance, he should have been at the summoning, but he was stuck in a war council. No doubt he wants to apologize."

The thought of eating a meal with a king caused an eruption of nerves, but thinking it through logically, I wasn't completely sure why. I was *already* dealing with royalty. It helped that Stephanie had been there from the beginning and was acting friendly. The king was still just a nebulous idea, someone whose existence I was aware of but to whom I could put neither name nor face.

Wait, a *princess* had been ogling me. Should I be flattered? Surely being a princess gave her the pick of pretty noble boys or knights? She probably wouldn't be hanging around them in their underwear, admittedly, but even so, I didn't think there was much about me to ogle.

"We need to get you washed if you're going to visit the king!" exclaimed Mary, distracting me from my thoughts. "Is his room prepared?"

"It is," confirmed Stephanie. "The baths aren't available right now, because we removed the fire crystals to repurpose into weapons, but I've already asked for hot water to be brought up. We should have prepared clothes too, but..." started Stephanie, finishing her sentence by peering down at her own grubby dress. "We'll have some changes of clothes ready by tomorrow, even if they won't reach the standard we'd like to offer. Again, I can only apologize for the conditions here, but if they were better..."

"Then you wouldn't have needed a hero," I finished for her. It wasn't as if I were about to complain. I was a university student, for goodness' sake! Fresh clothes every day? What sort of alien concept was *that*? Heck, I had my own *maid*! She obviously wasn't the only

one around either, if someone else was bringing water up. The topic of my meals hadn't come up thus far, yet I already found it rather unlikely that anyone was going to ask me to cook or wash any dishes. The bathing situation sounded rather unfortunate, and I was going to miss my shower, but aside from that, this was an *increase* in living standards.

And so I wandered the corridors of the castle once more, accompanied by my bodyguard and maid. This time, I was led to a better-furnished room. The furry hide of some long-dead animal covered up a part of the floor, in front of a single bed. A candelabra was placed on a nightstand, but instead of candles, a small orb of light floated above each arm, looking like a weaker version of Lux. There was a desk with a simple wooden chair against one wall, and a wardrobe against another. Instead of windows, the room had arrow slits, which made a sort of sense since this was obviously a castle. It was stranger that the room I'd been summoned into had a full window.

It did, however, mean that the room had only the one exit—an exit that Christine positioned herself in front of. Again, perfectly normal behavior for a bodyguard, but it did nothing to help my nerves. It wasn't as if I'd have been able to escape from the window of the tower room—being able to fit through didn't help when there was a five-story drop on the other side—but the feeling of being blocked in was uncomfortable.

One corner of the room was concealed by a privacy screen, a gentle mist of steam rising up from behind it. Apparently, the hot water had already arrived, although when I poked my head around, all that was there was a large bucket with a cloth draped over the side.

"Okay, get your clothes back off, and I'll wipe you down," happily offered Mary.

"Uhh... No offense, but I'll do it myself."

"Are you sure? Don't you at least want me to do your back?"

"I'm okay. Honestly."

Yeah, I wasn't going to stand around naked while some poor slave girl washed any part of me. Just because I was considering

mass murder against a race I'd never even met was no excuse to let my morals slip in other areas, no matter how tempting it was. I mean, I was nineteen and male! Whatever my mind insisted, my body had its own independent opinions. Thankfully, my mind also reminded me that Eve was waiting for me back home, and I had no intention of betraying her trust.

Wait.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" I asked, squinting at Mary.

"Doing what?" she asked, cocking her head in confusion. She radiated nothing but pure, innocent incomprehension.

"Apparently not. Sorry."

If the women were to be believed, the fate of their kingdom depended on them finding a hero to fight for them. It didn't have to be me, but now that I'd agreed, they'd begun to invest resources in me. How far would they go to ensure those resources weren't wasted? Surrounding me with girls all close to my age? Girls who kept expressing interest in odd little ways? Were they trying to get me attached to them? On the other hand, they had all been there before I'd arrived, so if it was deliberate, that would imply they knew my gender and approximate age beforehand...

As I wiped away the sweat of my training, hiding from both bodyguard and maid behind the privacy screen, I couldn't help but feel that I was dancing in the palm of someone's hand. I wasn't even sure whose.

Thanks to that training session, I was also starting to feel it didn't matter. Christine was supposedly on the stronger side for a human, and she thought that within a few days she'd need to use body strengthening to beat me. What she hadn't factored in was that within a few days, I could probably learn to use body strengthening myself. And if that was after only a few days, what could I do after a week?

At that point, if I decided to leave this city, could anyone stop me?

It was with that rather violent thought in mind that I redressed myself in my jeans and T-shirt and set off to meet a king.

"Something's wrong," commented Fang Zorzomon, observing the walls of Fort Mertti via the image produced by a Prospectus spell.

"How so?" asked Claw Thazremath, watching the same image. "I've seen no signs of them sneaking food or water past the siege. They've not made any successful strikes against our forces. Each of our attacks wears them down with minimal losses to our own side. The defenders have no hope."

"Perhaps despair is all that it is, but one should never trust to optimism in war."

"Perhaps I'd be able to offer some better insight if you ditched the philosophy and spelled out what you've noticed," retorted Thazremath.

"True," Zorzomon admitted. "You said that they've not made any successful strikes, and that's true, but for two days now they have made *no* strikes. They've changed strategies. They aren't even trying to break the siege."

"Maybe they've realized they *can't* break the siege, and are buying as much time as they can in the hopes of a miracle? It's true that we've fallen a full day behind our projected schedule, but I really don't see what holding out for an extra day or two would buy them."

"A miracle, huh?" pondered Zorzomon, frowning. "We never did manage to block their communications, even if we've stopped them from teleporting supplies in. Tell me, have our spies reported any interesting movements in the human capital?"

"Nothing that was judged to be of great importance. The juiciest gossip was that the king ordered a quantity of furnishings to be ripped out of the castle and traded to the dwarves for weapons, but the volume of the trade wasn't strategically important, so the report wouldn't have made it as high up as you. It almost seemed like a publicity stunt, to show the people that the king was prepared to put himself through hardship too, except that news of the deal was actively suppressed among the general population. The current theory is that it was a display put on to cajole uncooperative nobles. Why? What sort of movements were you hoping for?"

"I was wondering if the foolish human king had completely taken

leave of his senses and summoned a hero, and had ordered the army to buy as much time as possible to train them."

"You think the humans summoned a hero?" asked Thazremath, not looking at all disturbed about the prospect. "Oh, I really, *really* hope so. That would make everything *so* much easier. We should have our agents in the capital begin a search immediately."

Chapter 6: Audience

I sat at a plain wooden table in uncomfortable silence, peering at my stew. I'd tried to eat it, but I wasn't really hungry. Being summoned at nearly midnight and ending up in early afternoon had caused one hell of a bout of jet lag, and bits of my body were insisting it was around 5 a.m. and far too early for breakfast. It was surprising I hadn't fallen asleep in the middle of my training session, but between the excitement and exertion, it made some sort of sense. Now that I'd stopped, though, I was really feeling it.

Of course, the other part of my lack of hunger was that I was sharing the table with a princess, king, and queen. The overall concentration of royalty was significantly above anything I'd consider comfortable. Christine and Mary stood against a wall behind me, while a couple of knights stood against the opposite wall, behind the royal couple, their faces and features hidden beneath full helmets and plate mail.

I wasn't too sure about the use of plate mail for bodyguards. Wouldn't it impede their ability to react quickly? And when were Christine and Mary supposed to eat?

I'd been picturing King Edward as tall and regal, wearing those posh medieval clothes with far too many ruffles. In fact, he was wearing the same sort of armor as Christine, except that his was less dented. Seemed an odd choice of clothing for a dinner table, but given their concern about assassinations, I could see the logic. Unlike me, the king wasn't exactly a secret. In a nod to his status, he did at least have a circlet of metal on his head, like some sort of casual-wear crown.

I hadn't pictured Queen Janna at all, because I hadn't known she existed. Logically, given the existence of Stephanie and her siblings, there must have been a queen or mistress of some sort around somewhere, but no one had mentioned her, and I hadn't given it any

thought. Now that I saw her, she was almost the spitting image of Stephanie. Very similar features, the same hair, matching eye color. Even their clothes were similar. She was simply Stephanie with a few extra wrinkles.

"Is the food not to your liking?" asked Stephanie, despite the fact that she wasn't exactly attacking her own either. "I apologize it's vegetarian, but given the limited available fertile land, it's been a long time since we've had the leeway to raise livestock for food."

"It's fine, I'm just tired."

"That's not a surprise after the afternoon you've had," responded the king. "I'm impressed you were able to keep up with Christine. It's a good sign."

"Oh, yes, that too, but mostly it's because you summoned me in the middle of the night."

"Oh! Why didn't you say?" exclaimed Stephanie. "You could have slept rather than training this afternoon."

"Nah. The best way of dealing with jet lag is to work through it."

Stephanie nodded, leaving me wondering how my divine powers had translated jet lag. I'd seen no signs they'd invented jets, but everyone had nonetheless understood what I meant. Given the existence of magic, maybe they had a teleportation equivalent.

The brief burst of conversation over, I returned to prodding my stew. It wasn't just me and Stephanie, but the king and queen weren't exactly eating with gusto either. Was this not their normal mealtime? But if this were set up specifically to talk with me, there didn't seem to be much talking. Maybe they were both just stressed?

Personally, I was—to make a bad pun—*stewing* over whether to ask for more details on the war. If I did, would they be suspicious that I was suspicious? Or would talking about it be the natural thing to do if I wasn't suspicious, and therefore *not* talking about it was suspicious? Why did my divine gifts not come with social expertise?

"So...I wanted to apologize," said the king, interrupting everyone's stew-poking. "Saying that we've inconvenienced you for our own ends barely even scratches the surface, and yet you've still agreed to save us. For that, I can only bow my head in thanks."

He did indeed bow his head. The thin metal circlet he was

wearing on his head—which wasn't fixed in place by anything—fell off. It landed in his stew with a plop, showering him and the table with gravy.

This was not a man used to bowing his head. Also apparently not a man who knew how to react when he was showered in gravy.

The queen's lips twitched, and she covered her mouth with a hand, but she wasn't fooling anyone. Her shaking shoulders gave away how hard she was trying to stifle her laughter.

Stephanie didn't bother hiding it, bursting into riotous laughter. "Father!" she exclaimed.

The door of the room clicked as Mary rushed out, hopefully seeking either help or a towel.

King Edward himself appeared to have no idea how to react, staring down at himself in silence, waiting for his brain to reboot. I was in much the same condition. Would it be lèse-majesté to laugh at him? Should I be doing something to help? Averting my eyes? It was only the surrealness of the situation that stopped me immediately following Stephanie's lead, but I could already feel the corners of my mouth edging upward as my brain insisted it was funny.

I copied the queen, hiding my mouth behind a hand.

Impressively, Christine didn't even twitch. Nor did the other two knights. Maybe they weren't even real people, and this room just happened to be decorated with a couple suits of armor.

"Err..." said King Edward.

"I apologize for my clumsy father," said Stephanie, still giggling. "I'm sure Mary will be back soon with a cloth."

Mary did indeed turn up again very quickly. Thankfully, most of what had hit the king had ended up on his breastplate, from which it was easily wiped off, and some amount of dignity was restored. Nevertheless, it did a wonderful job of framing him as a fallible human and not some sort of unapproachable monarch, and the discomfort that had been hanging around the table was washed away. We soon got chatting properly. Not about the war, but I learned the names and ages of Stephanie's siblings, that Queen Janna wrote romance novels, and that King Edward would much

rather be in the countryside fishing than stuck in the castle. They might be royalty, but beneath that, they were just people. Just like me.

After Thomas left, escorted by Christine and Mary to ensure he didn't get lost—or deliberately go exploring and see something he shouldn't—Stephanie peered suspiciously at her father.

"Was that deliberate?" she asked.

"Err... As much as I want to claim it was a deliberate tactical decision on my part, no. No, it was not. My usual diadems are enchanted to not fall off, but they were all too gaudy for today."

"It was a resounding success, though," opined Queen Janna. "You really got him to open up. A most promising young man, I thought. It's a shame that summoned heroes are automatically returned home once their tasks are complete, or else I'd be giving thought to what to do with him *after* he's dealt with our demon problem. What do you think, Stephanie?"

"Even if we could keep him, it wouldn't be feasible. Our illusion of destitution will be relatively simple to keep up for as long as all he sees is his corner of the castle and the battlefield, but not beyond that. There's no way he could move freely around the kingdom and interact with nobles without realizing he'd been fooled. Even if we could keep up the illusion somehow, I'm not eating that gruel forever."

"Indeed. I'm surprised he took your claim about livestock at face value. There is land that is only lightly corrupted by miasma, yet not suitable for growing food crops. We're hardly going to ignore such land in the midst of a food crisis. Isn't it natural to fill it with grazing animals?"

"He's no farmer." Stephanie shrugged. "I probed his knowledge a little beforehand, so I knew I could get away with it."

"Even if it's not long-term, has he formed any other attachments to the kingdom?"

"Yes, actually. I'd say things are going even better than expected. The harem idea seems to be a bust: We've given him a slave who would enthusiastically fulfill his every whim, however depraved, but

he won't even let her see him naked, let alone take advantage of her in other ways. But frankly, I think what he is doing is even better. Rather than building shallow relationships based on pleasure and sex, or even trade or mutual advantage, he actually seems to care about people. At least, once he gets to know them. And now you two have added yourselves to that list."

"I think it's too soon to draw conclusions on the nature of his relationships; he hasn't even been here a full day. But yes, it's looking promising. The more he cares about us, the more likely he is to act to defend us. It might be worth making use of that..."

"How so?"

"We initially discounted the idea of faking an assassination attempt by the demons to bias him against them. If we staged a direct attack against him, by the time his skills had grown enough for such a move to not scare him off, the chances of him seeing through the deception would be too great. Alternatively, if we simply told him of an attempted but thwarted attack, the impact wouldn't be great enough to warrant the effort. But if he's already forming real bonds with people, the calculus has changed. We can use those bonds. Make some noise out in the corridor. Have Christine 'defend' him to stop him from leaving his room. The noise outside stops, we tell him we killed a couple of demon infiltrators, but Mary was hurt in the process."

"Hmm... But Mary isn't privy to any of our secrets. She *can't* be, as long as we have her consider Thomas a submaster; the conflicting interests would break her. We could withdraw his authority, given that he's openly stated he doesn't wish to be anyone's master, but even then, thanks to her collar, she'll never be able to deceive him effectively. She wears her emotions on her sleeve."

"True, but while we need to worry about a hero seeing through disguises or magical influences, there are no such concerns surrounding Mary. Her naivete could even prove an advantage. Hurt her for real. If she legitimately believes she was attacked by demons, she has no need to act, and the play will be all the more convincing."

"Yes, that's a good idea. My only concern is that should Mary get hurt, I suspect that Thomas will get *angry*. There will be a real risk of him immediately rushing to the battlefield."

"Then best we do this late enough that it's believable the demons were able to prepare it, but soon enough that Christine is still able to restrain him. The day after tomorrow, perhaps? And make sure Mary isn't *too* badly hurt."

Stephanie stared at her father in silence, but when she opened her mouth next, it wasn't to accuse him of callousness. "No. She should die in the attack. It's the best way to ensure Thomas never learns the operation of her collar."

"If you're concerned about Thomas acting out of anger, going that far sounds ill-advised. Could we not simply claim she's alive, but unable to continue her duties?"

"What about letting him see her on her deathbed and having her beg him not to do anything rash?" interjected Queen Janna, joining in the plotting without showing even a shred of indignation about the suggestion to murder an innocent slave simply to drive their summoned hero to hate demons.

"He's already learned Sanatio. We'll have to be careful that he doesn't heal her, but otherwise, yes. That could work, and in terms of psychological impact, I can think of nothing better."

Chapter 7: Night

"Grysuurm. Hydaxx schuurm."

I opened my eyes, trying to figure out what had woken me, only to find myself standing up. That was an unusual position to be in at the point of waking. Had I been sleepwalking?

If I had, I'd not only made it out of my room but also out of the castle, and quite possibly the city. It was hard to be certain, given the dark mist that made it hard to even see my hand in front of my face, but I could be reasonably sure of that; the city hadn't been built on ash. Therefore, the fact that my exposed toes were sinking slightly into a layer of ash placed me some distance from any part of this world I'd seen thus far.

I'd headed back to my room after my meal, kicked Mary and Christine out, and gone to bed. They'd assured me they'd both eat before resting, and that another guard would be hanging around outside if I needed anything. I hadn't really been in much of a mood to debate things, my jet lag finally having caught up with me, and I'd fallen straight to sleep. That guard obviously hadn't been up to much if I'd sleepwalked past him. Was this a kidnapping? Had my stew been drugged?

"Hydaxx lorc. Sa greel grysuurm."

"Uh... What?" I answered. Didn't my divine gift let me understand *any* of the world's languages? Then did that imply I hadn't merely left the city, but the entire planet? Normally a far-fetched theory, but it had already happened once...

The mystery speaker's voice was loud, slow, and deep—an almost guttural rumbling—but I could see nothing through the fog. I wandered toward it—on the basis that standing around wouldn't help and it was as good a direction as any—with hands outstretched to avoid bumping into anything.

A dark shape loomed out of the mists.

"Klazzacorl," rumbled the shape, and then it *roared*. The ashen floor danced, particles rising up as far as my waist, and the mists were blasted away, clearing in a giant circle around the roarer and revealing it in all its glory.





It was a dragon, standing on its hind legs, wings outstretched, towering over me like a mountain.

And it was staring *straight at me*.

There was no sound in the world except for that roar. There was nothing to see except the monstrous beast. It was everything. I was nothing, and—

"Thomas!" came a yell, and then I woke up. Again.

"What?" I asked, staring at the wooden ceiling of my bedroom.

"Are you okay? You screamed," said a voice I didn't recognize, and it took me a few moments to work out that it must have been my night guard, who'd rushed into the room, apparently in response to me screaming. I managed to pull myself up, so I was at least sitting upright, still clutching my blanket for modesty. Perhaps that was unnecessary; my room and the corridor were dark, with the only light being the small amount coming in through the arrow slits. The moon must have been bright outside, because the tiny slits still let in enough light for me to vaguely make out the guard, even if I did need to blink a few times to get my strangely blurred sight to clear up.

"Tom! What happened?" came a second, far more familiar voice as Mary rushed into the room, not in her maid's uniform but in a lacy white nightie, albeit still with her collar fastened around her neck.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I had a nightmare. I think."

"You *think*?" asked the dubious guard.

"It was rather, uh, *real*. Sorry to disturb you."

"I'd probably be having nightmares too, if I knew I was going to have to go fight demons," said Mary in a way that suggested she was trying to be reassuring. Alas, it was rather counterproductive; demons had been the last thing on my mind after that dream, but now she'd brought them back to the forefront.

"I'm fine. Go back to bed, Mary. Actually, how'd you even get here so fast?"

"My room is next door, in case you want me for anything during the night," she said, shrugging as if the answer were obvious.

"Oh. And is Christine's the other side?"

"Nope. Dunno where she went."

"Her room is in the east wing of the castle, in the barracks of the royal knights," answered the night guard. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. I had a nightmare. That was all."

"Then good night, and I hope you have better dreams."

"Me too," I fervently agreed as both visitors left the room, Mary giving me one last worried glance over her shoulder.

I flopped back to horizontal, but there was no way sleep would feature in my immediate future; after that nightmare, my heart was still hammering in my chest, and there was probably more adrenaline in my blood than, well, *blood*.

Still, perhaps I could make use of my time. Given that I didn't entirely trust these people, I needed some contingencies. If everything was aboveboard, I didn't have anything to worry about until I faced the demons, when every bit of extra power would be useful. If it *wasn't*, then it would be advisable to ensure I learned a few tricks that my handlers didn't know about. An escape attempt where they knew my exact abilities would be far less likely to succeed.

Christine considering me unready to learn body strengthening wasn't a problem. It was an *opportunity*.

In her panic the first time I'd tried it, she'd unthinkingly given me a bunch of clues. I now knew that it wasn't enough to make my muscles stronger. I needed to strengthen my bones too, and the tendons that linked muscle to bone. In fact, pretty much everything. She'd told me the technique improved her perception as well as her speed. The technique was called *body* strengthening, after all, not *muscle* strengthening.

In retrospect, that was pretty obvious. I'd been rather foolhardy the first time around.

It also helped that I now knew healing magic, so if I screwed up again, I could unscrew myself. Assuming I was conscious. Probably best to ensure I refrained from rupturing my heart, a bit of advice that would apply equally strongly if I *didn't* know healing magic. It was a generally all-around good suggestion, really.

Once more, I pictured mana circulating through my body,

pervading not just my muscles but every single cell. Not simply making muscles contract harder, but improving every aspect of my biology. It was a rather nebulous image—I hardly knew what every cell in my body was supposed to be up to, let alone going even deeper like picturing every protein along with its role—but the healing magic mishap had already proven that the biological images I could conjure up were more than sufficient for my purposes. Perhaps there was some legendary level of magic that would need that knowledge, but Christine had told me body strengthening wasn't an advanced technique.

With the image in place, I very carefully raised an arm.

On the bright side, it didn't catch fire or snap off. On the downside, despite trying to move slowly, I lifted it with such force that I catapulted the blanket into the air. I froze, half expecting the guard to rush back in, but thankfully it hadn't made much noise. There was no reason to suspect I was up to anything suspicious. For all he knew, I could have just been rolling over—if he heard me at all.

So, a success of a sort; I'd managed to strengthen myself. The problem was that it completely destroyed my coordination. If I tried this standing up, there was no way I'd remain upright. I couldn't walk, let alone run or fight.

As the blanket drifted back down, I attempted a few more small movements, happy—albeit surprised—to find I suddenly seemed able to move like normal. And then the blanket landed, and the normal weight of it clued me in to reality; the moment I'd lost concentration, the effect had ended. Not only did I need to relearn how to control my enhanced body, but I needed to do so while concentrating on maintaining the body strengthening.

Christine was right; I wasn't ready. This was going to take more than one night.

I made a few more attempts, this time with my arms above the blanket, wondering how stupid I looked waving my limbs about in such an obviously uncoordinated way. Which raised an interesting question: Was anyone spying on me? Was that night guard defending me, preventing me from escaping, keeping an eye on me,

or a combination of the three? My attempts to learn an ability my handlers weren't aware of could have been doomed from the start.

There was no point in letting one variety of paranoia prevent me from taking precautions against another, though, so I continued with my efforts until the adrenaline wore off and sleep once again seemed like a possibility. By the end, I could sustain it fairly easily and make fine movements once more. I still couldn't trust myself to walk, though, let alone maintain my concentration in a combat situation. Still, it wasn't bad for an hour's work.

And then sleep was once more driven away by the way rolling over and trying to get comfortable was rewarded with a cold, damp sensation against my face. That was not a sensation the pillow had heretofore given. "**Lux**," I chanted, hoping to shed some light on the situation.

The room had been dark. The light from the arrow slits had been sufficient to make out my visitors, but they had been standing directly opposite the slits. My bed was in shadow; the light from outside hadn't been enough to see the bloodstains.

"The hell?" I muttered, fairly sure they hadn't been there when I'd gone to sleep. Had I messed up my body strengthening? Inspecting myself, as far as was possible without a mirror, didn't reveal any obvious sources of blood. Then again, if it was on the pillow, presumably it had come from my head?

A few careful pokes revealed crusted blood trailing from my eyes and nose, running down the side of my face. But I'd been doing my training on my back. It wouldn't have run in that direction; I hadn't been on my side since waking up.

Had it happened earlier? That would explain why the blood was clotted already, and why my sight was blurry. It was likely the guard had missed it due to the poor lighting; while any light from the windows was in his face, I had my back to it. To him, I'd probably been nothing more than a silhouette.

But that would place it in my *dream*. Dreams were not supposed to make your eyes bleed. Not even if they became nightmares.

"**Parvus Sanatio**," I chanted, because eyes generally weren't supposed to bleed, dreams or not, and so healing seemed advisable.

But that didn’t solve the fundamental issue. When the guard had woken me, I’d immediately written the nightmare off as “just” a dream. Apparently it wasn’t. That was rather disturbing. Was it an attack? A message? Some other divine gift kicking in and showing me a prophecy? Had a dragon actually been involved? From what Christine had said about their history, weren’t dragons even worse enemies than demons? But from her words, I’d assumed none were currently active.

The dragon had spoken. Not much, but there had been words. I couldn’t comprehend them at the time, and now I couldn’t even remember them, but they’d certainly been there. If I had to pick some adjectives for its countenance, “friendly” wouldn’t be among them. What sort of message hurt the receiver? Given the roar at the end, perhaps it would be best characterized as a threat.

Just one more thing I was going to need to ask about tomorrow.

Chapter 8: Magic

"Good morning, Tom," called a cheerful voice, waking me up from a dream that thankfully did not involve a single dragon.

"Already?" I answered blearily.

"Oh? Do you need more sleep?"

"Yes, but I probably shouldn't, if it's already morning."

Sleeping in would just extend my jet lag, so despite not having had a great night's rest, I dragged myself out of bed. Breakfast was already waiting on my desk, and my clothes were neatly folded over the back of the chair. They'd even managed to find me some clean underwear.

"How long have you been up?" I asked, wondering when this had all been prepared and how long Mary'd been sneaking around my room while I slept. I was fortunate she wasn't an assassin.

Actually, she was currently the *only* one in my room with me. This was an opportunity to ask a few more useful questions than how long she'd been awake.

"Since first chime," she answered.

"First chime? I haven't heard any chimes?"

"Of course not," she said, stifling a little giggle. "It would be a bit silly if the signal to wake the serving staff up to get ready for the day also woke up the people they were getting ready for."

"Logical, but that doesn't explain how it works," I answered, taking my clothes behind the privacy screen.

"I just put my timekeeper under my pillow."

Oh, so there wasn't one large bell. There were individual timekeepers. Or perhaps a central clock that broadcast a signal to smaller tools that went ding.

"Umm... Mary?"

"Yes?"

"Sorry for the odd question, but you're, well, happy, right?"

"Of course! I take my duties seriously."

"What does doing your job have to do with being happy? No, never mind. More importantly, you were calling me 'master' yesterday, but it's not like I bought you or signed anything. Presumably someone else did, and they've simply told you to act that way toward me?"

"Yes. My owner is Minister Dennis Banks." Her smile twisted into a cute pout. "I was really excited when he gave me his first ever explicit order, but then he said he'd have nothing more to do with me!"

"Only one? What was it?" I asked, wondering why that would be exciting.

Mary froze, her pout wiped from her face and replaced by a pained grimace. "Uh... Uh..." she stammered.

"You aren't allowed to tell me?"

She shook her head desperately.

"Okay. Never mind, then."

She sagged with relief as the smile gradually reemerged, while I tried to make sense of her response. Giving her an instruction and then telling her not to talk about it sure seemed like more than one order.

I pondered as I emerged fully dressed from behind my screen and sat down for breakfast. The explanation that made the most sense was that the minister she'd mentioned had delegated his power over her to someone else—but obviously not directly to me.

"Can you tell me the set of people other than Minister Dennis from whom you'll accept orders?" I asked between mouthfuls.

"Princess Stephanie, Lady Christine, and yourself," she answered, apparently not having been banned from spilling that information.

But not Wendy? That was interesting. "And orders from Princess Stephanie and Christine have higher priority than mine?"

She froze up again.

"It's okay. If you aren't allowed to answer something, just say so. You don't need to feel bad about it."

It wasn't as if she needed to answer explicitly; the fact that she couldn't was answer enough already.

"Sorry..." she mumbled.

"Why? It's not your fault," I answered as I pondered my next move. Obviously, she'd been ordered to hold her tongue about certain things, and even if that collar didn't inflict any sort of mind control, she still seemed incredibly averse to going against orders. Thankfully, whoever had been ordering her hadn't been particularly thorough, a fact I intended to make full use of.

"Have you been ordered to lie to me about anything?" I asked.

"No," she answered instantly, shaking her head so fast that it almost gave *me* whiplash.

"Have you lied to me about anything in the past?"

"No!"

"Have you ever said anything deliberately misleading, or omitted information you thought I would want to know?"

"No! Don't you trust me?" she asked in return, looking as if she were about to burst into tears.

Someone could have told her to lie about lying, but so far nothing she'd done had indicated the existence of any acting skills whatsoever. She looked genuinely distraught at the thought I might not trust her.

"I trust you," I answered honestly. It was hard not to. "But you're asking the wrong question. You *should* be asking if I trust that Minister Dennis you mentioned, since you'll obviously follow his orders over mine. I've never met him, so saying I trusted him at this point would be rather premature. You've obviously been in my room for some amount of time without me waking up. If he told you to stab me in my sleep, what would you do?"

That had apparently been the wrong thing to say. The smile had reappeared instantly when I'd told her I trusted her, then vanished again when I started talking about Dennis, but once I'd mentioned stabbing, she froze up again, shuddering, looking almost like she was in physical pain.

"I— I—" she stammered.

"Don't answer that. In fact, forget I even asked. Now, what are the plans for this morning?"

The shuddering ceased, but this time she took a little longer to

recover, not immediately answering my question.

"A magic lesson with Wendy," came an answer anyway—Christine was standing in my doorway. How long had she been there?! What had she overheard? "Once you're done eating breakfast, Mary will take you back out to the courtyard, and you'll meet her there."

"Not 'we'? You're not coming?"

"I'll escort you as far as the courtyard, but then I'll leave you in Wendy's care. I have my own training to do, after all, and even if she's not a war mage, she's enough to keep you safe."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "I'm done with my breakfast, so shall we get going?"

The three of us walked the corridors of the castle once more.

"Uh... Random question, but there aren't any dragons rampaging around at the moment, are there?" I asked.

"Indeed not. I almost wish that one was; it's one of the few ways that I can see the demon war ending without our complete defeat. Alas, even then, it's likely that the world would be plunged into an even worse state once the dragon was dealt with. But why do you ask?"

"I had a dream about a dragon last night. It was, um, oddly realistic."

"I'm sure it was just a dream. Don't let it worry you."

"It made my eyes bleed."

Christine stopped walking. "Pardon?"

"The dragon roared in my dream. When I woke up, there was blood over my face and pillow."

"What?! You didn't say!" exclaimed Mary.

"I didn't notice until you'd left and I'd calmed down. I could heal myself, and I was too exhausted to do anything about it." Not to mention that the memories had blurred quickly after waking, just like a regular dream. Despite the blood, it was really hard to think of it as important, which was rather suspicious in itself...

"That is...worrying," stated Christine, which I felt was obvious enough to not need to be said. "You say you fell back asleep after and did not suffer a repeat?"

"Yup. Slept like a log until Mary woke me up."

"Very well. I will forgo my training this morning and make some inquiries."

"Thanks," I said as we ignored the changing room and stepped outside, where Wendy was already waiting. "No armor today?"

"Not for your first magic lesson. Perhaps once Wendy decides you're ready for some direct experience using defensive magic in combat, but that won't be today."

"Logical. Thanks for the escort, and see you later."

"Yes, you will. Please wait for me to return before you leave this courtyard. Given your experience last night, it's more important than ever that you're defended."

The knight did an about-face and reentered the castle. "Also, while I'm investigating your dream, I'll inquire with Minister Dennis about transferring official ownership of Mary," she added, still with her back to us. "It won't do for our hero to not be able to trust his own maid."

Drat. She'd at least partially overheard my questioning. I needed to be more careful. Thankfully, I hadn't said anything particularly incriminating, and neither Mary's answers nor Christine's reaction had given much cause for concern. Hopefully... She'd said it was more important than ever I was defended, but what use was an armed guard if what I needed protection from was inside my dreams?

"Now that you're finally here, shall we get started?" asked Wendy. "You've proven perfectly capable of casting spells without any sort of background knowledge, but I think we should cover a small amount of theory anyway. The knowledge will be useful for the more advanced images."

I nodded, having no objection to that plan. Mary nodded too, obviously doing her best to listen in despite having stopped by the castle wall instead of following me out into the courtyard.

"If you want to take part, come and stand over here," I called. "It'll be far easier."

"I don't have permission to leave my post," she answered.

"Sheesh. *I* give you permission, so get over here."

She beamed and came jogging over.

"Uh... As long as you don't mind," I added to Wendy. It seemed impolite to add a second person to her class without her permission.

She simply shrugged her shoulders before continuing as if the interruption had never happened. "Let's start with one of the biggest questions of them all. What is mana?"

She looked at me, obviously expecting an answer, which seemed rather unfair. How was I supposed to know? Putting together the fact that the divine blessing translated whatever she was saying to "mana," which had some Earth connotations, combined with its use in the images of the spells I knew, I put together the best guess I could. "The fuel for magic?"

"Half marks. Mana is indeed the fuel for magic, but that's an answer to the question 'What is it used for?' rather than an explanation of what it is. Any further guesses?"

"Nope," I answered instantly. That would be like trying to answer the question "What is light?" without ever having heard of a photon. I had no hope of making a guess based purely on Earth connotations.

Although, if her explanation involved thaums, I was going to laugh.

She didn't explain at all, instead turning to Mary and treating her as part of the class.

"Nobody knows," answered Mary.

"Exactly! Despite centuries of research, we have *no idea* what mana is."

"Oh," I responded, feeling somewhat let down.

"If you want to help us fix that, you're more than welcome," smirked Wendy. "Until then, the best we've managed is to measure its empirical properties. For example, we know it's pervasive; it's impossible to isolate any material that does not contain mana. It also appears to be unlimited; no one has ever managed to cause an area to 'run out' of mana."

"Wait," I interjected. "If it's pervasive, why do spell images, or even body strengthening, involve drawing mana out of the air? Why not use what's already within us? And if it's unlimited, what is mana capacity?"

"Both very good questions. The answer to the first wasn't something I planned to deal with because it's not important, but the short explanation is that I lied. There is indeed *one* material that excludes mana: soul. As for your second question, what are your thoughts?"

Again? Thankfully, based on her first answer, I could hazard a guess. "Drawing in mana from the air takes effort, and, like a muscle, you can exhaust yourself?"

"A very good answer. Pretty much spot-on, in fact; the muscle analogy runs deeper than you think. Do you know the difference between a sprinter and a marathon runner?"

Sheesh, this class contained more questions than answers. Fortunately, this one was easy. "A sprinter can produce great bursts of power, while a marathon runner produces less but can sustain it for longer."

"Exactly, and so it is for mana. We describe it as the breadth and depth of your mana capacity. Someone with deep reserves could perhaps fling out a cast of Ignis Pila—a basic fireball—once a minute more or less indefinitely. Someone with broad reserves could cast it a dozen times over the span of a single minute, but then may need to rest an hour before they could cast it again. Or they could cast Conflagratio once, a much stronger spell that someone with deep but narrow reserves could never manage. Obviously, as a hero, your reserves will be both wide and deep, and your 'muscle' will grow stronger at a far faster rate than us normal folks."

Mary nodded happily, as if she were being praised herself.

"That being the case, we need to start exercising that 'muscle.' Shall we see if you can pull off Conflagratio?"

Chapter 9: Spells

I peered at Wendy suspiciously. What had started as a lesson in background theory had somehow escalated into her wanting me to cast what was apparently high-level fire magic. Magic that some actual qualified mages didn't even have the mana to cast.

Wait, that phrasing was inaccurate, given how mana apparently worked. Didn't have the control over enough mana to cast? Whatever. That wasn't the point. The point was that I didn't want to suffer another body-strengthening-type mishap.

"Shouldn't we start with something a little smaller?" I suggested.

"It's not interesting if I know you're going to pull it off the first time, and besides, we're kinda in a rush."

"Uninteresting is good. Uninteresting is *safe*."

Wendy shrugged. "Didn't have you pegged as the boring type, but if you insist. Ignis Pila, then. The image is simple enough; gather mana in front of your palm, crush it into a sphere, then set it alight. Similar to Lux, except you *really* don't want to be holding the resulting fireball. As you chant, aim it and will it to move."

She demonstrated as she spoke, holding a palm vertically in front of her, aimed at one of the archery targets that were lined up on the far side of the courtyard.

"**Ignis Pila**," she chanted, and the air in front of her palm caught alight, then shot off at the target, scoring a direct hit. Fragments of burning wood erupted into the air as the basketball-sized fireball detonated, thankfully at sufficient distance that our group had nothing to worry about.

"That's not a low-level spell, either, is it?" I asked dryly.

"Of course not. The lowest level of fire magic is Parvus Ignis, but a hero like you isn't going to need weak spells like that. No point wasting your memory on it."

She cast it as she spoke, pointing a finger right at my forehead. A

tongue of flame a couple of inches in length burst from her fingertip, flickering harmlessly in the air for a few seconds before burning out, not coming anywhere close to reaching me.

"What if I want to, uhh, set some kindling alight?" I tried, but I had to admit, that spell was pretty weak.

It was also made up of words I already knew. In that case, could they be combined in other ways?

"**Sanatio Pila**," I tried, aiming my palm at another target and trying to form an image that mixed my healing magic with the fireball. A ball of yellow light launched itself at the target and struck exactly where I'd been aiming, but with no discernible effect.

"What was that?" complained Wendy, sounding more disappointed than surprised. "I don't know how much more healing magic Mary has been teaching you, but we're supposed to be learning offensive magic right now. Long-range healing isn't really something you're likely to need."

"I didn't teach him that," denied Mary, shaking her head. "I only know Parvus Sanatio."

"I was just wondering if the common use of 'parvus' meant that 'pila' was equally common, so I figured I'd give it a go," I explained. "Besides, I thought healing magic would matter less if I missed the target, but that doesn't seem to be an issue."

"No. It takes a very special kind of talent to miss a stationary target with aimed spells. They will always strike *exactly* the point you imagine them striking. And yes, there are a set of standard spell modifiers. Once again, that's a topic I was intending to get to at a later date. For now, since you were the one who insisted on learning Ignis Pila, would you *please* cast it?"

"**Ignis Pila**," I chanted, aiming at the same target. Once again, my spell impacted it dead center, but this time it had a very discernible effect indeed. Once more, splinters of burning wood rained down upon the opposite side of the courtyard, and I couldn't help but notice that the effect was exactly the same as Wendy's.

"Ignis Pila," shouted Mary, holding up her hand, but nothing happened. "Aww."

"I don't believe you have an affinity for red magic?" asked Wendy.

"Nope, but I thought I'd try anyway!"

"Can we get back to theory for a bit?" I asked. "I've noticed with both Lux and Ignis Pila that my spells are identical in power to others'. Are they standard?"

"Oh. I didn't even think to cover that, because it's obvious. Yes, of course. Ignis Pila is Ignis Pila, no matter who casts it. If you want a different effect, you cast a different spell."

So it made no difference how much mana I imagined pouring into a spell. The effect would be the same regardless.

"Okay, next question. What are affinities?"

"Something you don't need to worry about, because heroes have all of them. You can use any color of magic without penalty."

I peered at Wendy, frowning. She seemed to be skipping a load of important stuff.

"There's no point looking at me like that. What do you want from me? The mage course at the royal academy is fourteen seasons long. Fourteen. *Seasons.* I've been told to raise you into a world-class combat mage within a *week*. We don't have *time* for an in-depth discussion of theory, or to learn every single minor spell. You need to learn how to reduce entire battalions to ash, and to prevent them from doing the same to you. That's all."

I hate this.

Here I was, in a fantasy land, with magic quite literally at my fingertips, and I didn't get to play with it because they needed to mold me into a weapon of war? If I pulled it off, I *still* wouldn't get to play with it, because I'd be automatically sent home, and if I didn't, it would be a moot point on account of me being dead. I understood their desperation, but even so...

"I still don't know how long a season is."

"Ah, right, you heroes come from a world that orbits its sun and use that for timekeeping. This place is more static. A season is fifteen weeks."

So, the academy was four-ish years, then, given that days seemed approximately the correct length. And was fifteen weeks chosen at random, or did it delineate something? And how did this planet not just fall into the sun? Far too many questions, and far too

little time.

"Fine. What's the image for Conflagratio?" I asked, trying to get back on topic.

"Gather the mana above yourself, compressing it, but in a much larger volume. More of a cloud than a sphere. Then fling it at your target, and imagine it catching fire on impact. I'll demonstrate."

Wendy took on a look of concentration, eyes closed, one arm held directly above her, palm open and facing the heavens. Nothing visible happened for a few seconds, until her eyes snapped open. "**Conflagratio**!" she yelled, and despite nothing visible moving between herself and the target, the far end of the courtyard erupted into flame. The heat was palpable even from where we stood, the fuel-less fire raging for a full twenty seconds before it died away. The rest of the targets had simply ceased to exist, with even the exterior wall of the castle left scorched.

Wendy staggered slightly, beads of sweat running down her face that had nothing to do with the heat. "Like... Like that," she panted. "Now... You try..."

Wasn't she supposed to be a wind mage? Yes, she was left exhausted, but that had been a pretty big fire spell. In fact, so far she'd cast nothing but fire spells. Despite her opinion, I felt like I'd quite like that explanation of affinities.

Leaving my teacher to get her breath back, I tried to replicate the feat, drawing in mana to the air above me. If it was present in infinite amounts, what meaning did compressing it have? Likewise, why did I need to draw it anywhere if it was there already? I could guess it had to do with the "breadth" of my mana control, placing a limit on the amount of mana I could extract from one unit of air in one unit of time, but I really would've appreciated it being explained properly.

"Conflagratio!" I shouted, pointing at the exterior castle wall at the far end of the courtyard in lieu of any surviving targets.

Nothing happened.

"Hah. So even our wonder-boy hero can't cast *every* spell the first time," smirked Wendy, who'd gotten her breath back while I'd been attempting my cast.

"Is there any way to make mana visible?" I asked. "How am I supposed to know where I went wrong if I'm working completely blind?"

"Yup. I suppose learning that would—" started Wendy before freezing. Her eyes flickered from me to Mary and back, before deciding the ground was in need of a careful inspection. "Actually, the image for that one would need a week or two of background knowledge to even attempt. I'll cast it myself and describe to you what's happening. **Magiae Visus**."

What?

What in the heck was *that*? She'd obviously been about to teach me, but then changed her mind. The excuse was obviously an *excuse*, despite being perfectly reasonable. Had she come out with it immediately, instead of looking so incredibly guilty, I'd have thought nothing of it.

"Conflagratio!" I shouted again.

"You aren't gathering anywhere near enough mana," she informed me. "You need to triple the amount you're putting into it."

"Huh? I'm already gathering as much as I can!"

"Hmm... Were the mana reserves of a hero supposed to be so small? Maybe it's because you've only been here for a day..."

"Yesterday, a single cast of Sanatio almost knocked him out," Mary pointed out. "He's already cast two spells of the same level today and doesn't even look tired. Try again tomorrow, maybe?"

"Huh..." I commented, not having even noticed that I'd already blown yesterday's limit. Didn't that imply my mana capacity had more than doubled since then? Or had my body strengthening attempt consumed some of it yesterday, leaving me with less?

"Then we'll need to train the breadth of your mana capacity. Hmm... Try Maius Ignis Pila. Much the same as Ignis Pila, but pour additional mana into it and build a bigger fireball."

Then "maius" was the modifier for making a spell stronger, like "parvus" made it weaker?

"**Maius Ignis Pila**," I chanted, launching an empowered fireball at the castle wall. The thing had enlarged from the size of a basketball to a beach ball, and I could feel the heat radiating from it.

"Hmm..." commented Wendy as the spell was still in flight. "Perhaps I should have—"

What she should have done I never got to hear, for two reasons. The first was the wave of dizziness and nausea that seemed to accompany the overuse of mana. "Tom!" exclaimed Mary as she caught me, thankfully preventing me from face-planting into the packed dirt.

The second was because the fireball impacted.

The explosion was smaller than Wendy's Conflagratio, but it was more focused. She'd set half the courtyard alight, while my fireball was "merely" beach ball-sized. Consequently, while she'd only scorched the wall, I managed to shatter its surface. Small shards of stone rained down over the courtyard. Some of them were molten.

"**Scutum**," chanted Wendy absentmindedly, a flickering transparent brown square snapping into existence in front of us. A few of the stone shards pinged off it.

The three of us stood and watched the destruction die down, Mary supporting my weight.

"As I was saying, perhaps we should arrange some *proper* magic targets," continued Wendy, her voice barely audible above the ringing in my ears. "The ones with the reinforcement enchantments that dissipate elemental mana."

I was fairly sure I could hear shouting from various directions, too, but once again, the ringing in my ears—caused by the noise of the explosion—was getting in the way. "**Parvus**—" I started, unthinkingly trying to fix myself regardless of the fact that I'd already overdrawn on mana. Before I could finish the chant, my nausea doubled and my vision blackened.

"Tom!" repeated Mary as I fell limp in her arms.

Chapter 10: Lies

"Ugh," I groaned, trying to remember how to open my eyes.

I successfully managed my difficult quest on the third attempt, and was rewarded for my victory with the sight of the wooden ceiling of my borrowed room, coupled with a pounding headache.

"Wasn't I in the courtyard?" I mumbled.

"You passed out from mana exhaustion," came an answering voice. "You shouldn't try to cast spells when you're already worn out."

"Mary?" I asked, just to confirm, because it was going to be a few more minutes until I was up to sitting up.

"Yup. I carried you all the way back!" she proudly declared.

"*Before* changing, the poor girl," said a second voice, this one belonging to Christine, assuming my ears were now functioning correctly. "I've had some hot water brought in, and we've found some clothes that should fit, so please wash and dress yourself before your session with the princess."

"What? Why would we both need to change?"

No one answered.

"Did I miss something?"

"You threw up," answered Mary, sounding somewhat reluctant. She probably wanted to keep quiet about it, but was obligated to answer me.

"Yes, you did," confirmed Christine. "From what I heard, you once again did something incredibly foolish, knocking yourself out and wasting the scant time we have. And since Mary was holding you upright at the time, she got the worst of it. I know it wasn't deliberate, but nevertheless, I feel compelled to ask that you please don't mistreat our staff."

Had I been capable of moving, I'd have glared at her for implying I was mistreating anyone. Yes, I'd been a bit silly, but it had been a

reflex. I was injured, so I tried to heal myself.

How the heck did *that* become a reflex when I'd only ever healed myself once? It hadn't even been with the same spell! Was this some sort of weird hero instinct?

Had my mana muscle recovered enough during the enforced nap to cast it again? How could I find out? Would healing magic even help with mana exhaustion in the first place? Probably not, or Mary would have cast it.

"Well, are you getting up or not?" asked Christine.

"Not yet. I can't move."

She clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Mary? Please get him ready, even if he complains. If it's just mana exhaustion, he should be fine in half an hour or so."

"Uh..." she said, sounding conflicted about it.

"It's okay. Until you're done, his opinion doesn't matter. Consider it payback."

"Yes, Mistress," she agreed, suddenly sounding cheerful again.

"Hey!" I complained, not enjoying Mary's sudden swing of loyalty.

"You may not have noticed, but you're already naked," pointed out Christine. "We could hardly put you to bed in vomit-soaked clothing. Mary stripped you off in the courtyard, and Wendy hosed you down with water magic."

"Not just Mary, but *Wendy* saw everything too?"

"And half a dozen knights and guards that came running to investigate the explosion," Mary added helpfully as she threw the blanket off me.

I blushed furiously, assaulted by a dose of mortification that did far more damage than any fireball. I was too stunned to even comment when Mary effortlessly lifted me from the bed.

Christine sighed, although since she was outside of my field of vision, I had no idea what it was at. "Look, I'm sorry if I'm being harsh, but imagine things from my point of view. Humanity is in a position where its survival is best measured in days rather than weeks. Every hour matters, each one claiming the lives of more of our soldiers. Now all of humanity has staked its future on you, but we have no intention of sending you to your death, because that

would just kill all of us too. You need to *win*. You need training, and people are fighting and dying on the front lines to buy you the time you need. This is the second time in two days you've incapacitated yourself and delayed that training. How many lives do you think the delays will cost? How do you think *I* feel about them, given my position as your bodyguard?"

"Sorry," I muttered, but on reflection, I wasn't sure why. My actions hadn't been deliberate this time, unlike the body strengthening mishap. I'd simply followed Wendy's instructions, then accidentally tried casting another spell on top of that. With Wendy skipping over the bulk of the theory, I'd had no idea that serious mana overuse would knock me unconscious. Based on my experience with my first cast of Sanatio, I was expecting a mana potion to solve my problems.

Wait, if we used mana from the air, what the heck did a mana potion actually do? It obviously didn't supply the drinker with more mana. Not a hugely relevant question to occupy myself with at the present moment in time, but there were quite a lot of irrelevant things I was prepared to think about if it distracted me from the way Mary was enthusiastically scrubbing my naked, paralyzed body.

"Just... Please don't do anything unnecessary," concluded Christine. "Now I know you're, uh, *modest*, so I'll wait outside until you're decent again."

I heard the door click open and shut, presumably indicating her lack of presence.

Thankfully, as Christine had promised, I was starting to get some movement back; I was already able to wriggle my fingers. Not that wriggly fingers were anywhere near enough to defend me from the overenthusiastic maid.

"Were you always that strong?" I asked.

"I can use body strengthening. My mana capacity has always been poor, so it was a good way to train my control without draining myself too rapidly, and there was a small amount of overlap with the images needed to cast healing magic. With my limited mana, I was never going to be a great healer, but I was at least aiming for Sanatio."

And then I'd gone and cast it in front of her *accidentally*. That must have sucked almost as much as my vomit bath. "Sorry. It must have hurt to see me cast it effortlessly like that, then."

"Not at all! Seeing your accomplishment made me happy!"

Couldn't argue with that. She'd been the same earlier today too. Was it because I was the hero, fighting to save her?

"Well, thanks for getting started, but I think I've got enough movement back to finish cleaning myself, now," I said, once I'd regained enough movement in my arms.

"Sorry, but Christine told me to get you ready, and not to listen to you until I was done," she answered without even pausing.

No, she'd said my *opinion* didn't matter. Close, but not quite the same thing. Something had always gnawed at me about Mary's behavior, but now it was getting to the point I couldn't write it off as her simply being naturally enthusiastic. She strictly obeyed her orders and became incredibly uncomfortable when mine conflicted with someone else's, but all it took was Christine telling her to ignore my opinion, and suddenly she was able to act against my will without missing a beat. Occasions where she should have grown frustrated at me—for example, me throwing up all over her, or accidentally casting a spell she'd been unable to learn—she simply *didn't*.

It all felt a bit off. *Unnatural.*

Stephanie had claimed any magic that affected free will was illegal, and Mary had removed her collar without issue, or else that would have been my first thought.

And then I remembered Wendy's about-face with Magiae Visus. The way she'd glanced at Mary.

Perhaps it wasn't the collar?

By the time she'd finished washing me, I seemed to have completely recovered. Leaving the privacy screen to get dressed confirmed that the pair of us were alone in the room. A glance at the arrow slits revealed no one overtly hanging around outside. There could have been spies just out of sight, or Christine could have had her ear to the door, or someone could've been watching with magic. It was a risk, but I simply *had* to know.

Spell images seemed to all be simple enough: Gather mana and imagine it doing what you wanted it to do. Even the magic words followed a pattern. So I imagined mana gathering in my eyes, filtering the incoming light, and showing me what I wanted to see.

"**Magiae Visus**," I whispered, trying to keep the invocation as quiet as possible, but as usual, the magic took my words and amplified them, odd harmonics echoing around the room.

"Tom! You shouldn't be using mana yet!" admonished Mary, for the first time ever sounding genuinely cross at me.

Whether Christine had heard my spell or not, she certainly heard Mary's yell, and she burst back into the room.

"Seriously?" she complained.

"I'm fine. I've long since recovered," I answered, quickly grabbing the change of clothes from where they were draped over the back of the chair and darting back behind the privacy screen.

"Then why aren't you dressed? If you can move around already, you should have been ready ages ago."

"Because you ordered Mary to wash me regardless of my opinion, and didn't include any clauses about backing off once I could move again."

Christine grunted in displeasure as I threw on the clothes, but she didn't answer back. They'd given me simple trousers with a rope belt, along with a tunic. Both halves were scratchy, made from something like poorly woven hemp, which I suspected I'd find myself rather irritated by before too long. For now, though, I had more important things to think about. Most notably, the new overlay to my vision, showing me the nearby flows of mana.

For the most part, it was like looking into a thick fog. I couldn't see far through it, which made partial sense given that mana was supposed to be pervasive. Since it was also supposed to be unlimited, I wasn't sure why the spell worked at all. Should the fog not be infinitely thick? But for whatever reason, I could see a few yards, even through otherwise solid objects like the privacy screen. In fact, to my mana sight, the privacy screen, and even the walls of the room, were completely invisible, indistinguishable from the air.

Christine and Mary were voids in the fog. As they moved, the fog

rolled around them, obviously avoiding coming into contact. Nevertheless, small amounts seemed to be sucked into Christine, whether it tried to avoid her or not, where it flowed through her bones, nerves, blood vessels. Every part of her body, but in such a way that I could pick out individual components. At a guess, she was using body strengthening. Did she keep it active at all times? Was it reflex in response to Mary's shout?

Was it something more nefarious, a prelude to an attack against me?

The sword at her hip glowed more brightly than the fog, presumably enchanted in some way, as did her armor. I could see a few other small trinkets glowing beneath that armor, but since only the enchanted parts were visible, I couldn't tell what they were.

And as for my suspicion of nefariousness... Mary only carried a single enchanted item: her collar. And I could see thin wisps of mana detaching from it and floating into her brain.

I finally had my first definitive piece of evidence that these people had lied to me.

Chapter 11: Deception

I tried to keep a steady expression as I emerged from behind the screen, now clean and fully dressed with no vestiges of vomit anywhere.

That was a situation that I was struggling to maintain, given that my mana sight was still running, and I could still see the little strands of mana invading Mary's brain. The sight was making me nauseous all over again.

Had they been lying outright about magic that robbed people of their free will being outlawed? Probably not. Now that I reflected on it, it had been an oddly specific denial. There were plenty of ways of screwing someone over without outright denying them free will. Few people would argue that a drug addict was devoid of free will, for example, yet they'd go to lengths to get their next hit that no right-thinking individual would consider.

Heck, that could explain why Mary was always so enthusiastic about following orders, and panicky when she couldn't. Was her collar a sort of magical heroin, leaving her desperate to please her master to receive her next hit?

I struggled to think of any innocent explanation. The best I could come up with was a magical antidepressant, but even that would be morally sketchy; she'd said she was required to wear it by law. Did that apply to the magical part? Or maybe it was mind reading only, and not directly influencing her at all. But again, even if it was, that would merely make it *less* evil. It was still rather more evil than I was comfortable with.

In any case, I was hardly about to blurt out that I knew something was up—not until I was certain I had the ability to do something about it, or at the very least, escape. Given how desperately they seemed to need my help, and how little time they had to prepare me, I doubted they had the leeway to dispose of me

and summon a replacement, but they had other options. For all I knew, they'd try sticking one of those collars on *me*.

Lunch was little more than bread, after which I was supposed to meet with Princess Stephanie for some education. It seemed rather odd, given how Wendy was skipping over great chunks of interesting magical knowledge in the interests of saving time. What sort of education was so important that they'd take training time away to teach it? Knowing where the demons were would be helpful, but I doubted they planned to just push me out of the town gate and leave me to my own devices.

"I thought you said you'd fully recovered," commented Christine as we walked the corridors.

"I have."

"Your gait is less steady than normal."

"Is it?" I answered. The mana sight spell *still* hadn't worn off, so half my vision was insisting I was wading through thick fog. Perhaps that led to a subtle effect in the way I was walking, but if so, it shouldn't have been sufficiently noticeable for Christine to pick up. She wasn't even facing me! Nevertheless, I did my best to ignore its input and focus on my regular vision.

"Perhaps, being as yet unused to the physical enhancements bestowed on you by your blessings, you're lacking in awareness of the condition of your own body. It will be something to focus on in our training session later, but it's also all the more reason why you must avoid taking risks. What spell was so important that you felt the need to cast it while suffering mana exhaustion? Mary had already expended her mana on healing you, so there was no part of your condition that healing magic could aid further."

"Sorry, I didn't know that," I answered, which was perfectly true. If Christine took something else from my apology that I hadn't explicitly said, that was her fault.

Thankfully, Mary didn't out me, even if she did twitch at what was, to her, my obvious misdirection. Her order to stop caring about my opinion had expired the moment I was dressed, and even if Christine outranked me on the ladder of masters, I was starting to get a grip on the rules. If Christine didn't explicitly direct a question

at her, and Mary knew I didn't want to answer, she was unlikely to volunteer the information.

We headed deeper into the castle than I'd ever visited before, the corridor ending in a heavy double door, guarded by a pair of knights. I didn't get to see where it led, though, because we turned off into a side room just before it.

"Good afternoon," politely greeted Princess Stephanie, who was waiting within, seated in front of a large table which was occupied by an even larger map, the edges overhanging the insufficient space. A couple of bookshelves were placed against a wall, the shelves half full with rolls of parchment and an occasional tome.

"Huh?" I commented stupidly as my gaze rolled over the bookcase. Not that my focus was on it; my still-active mana sight showed me the mana *behind* it, on the other side of the wall, and what was there made no sense. "Uh, I mean, good afternoon," I hurriedly corrected myself.

"You do have books where you come from, right?" asked Stephanie, confused by my reaction.

"They're getting rarer, but yes. We don't have scrolls, though."

"But you know what scrolls are? Or is that just the translation kicking in?"

"Don't ask me. I still haven't figured out how, if there's magical translation going on, your mouths are moving in sync with your words."

"I was wondering that myself. If the opportunity presents itself, I may ask a priest for an opinion, but for now, let's focus on geography."

The map displayed the local continent in impressive detail, showing the countries of all four races. The human Ricousian Kingdom was the largest of the four, occupying the entire western side of the island. The demon Ti'zharr Empire was second largest and occupied the north. The smallest dwarven Commonwealth of Kalolamenz was to the south, and the elvish Methin Council to the east, not sharing a border with the human kingdom at all.

Vast swaths of land were shaded in dark purple, and I could hazard a guess what that represented. The dwarves especially

seemed to have barely any land left, a single vast tract of poisoned wasteland covering the western two-thirds of their already-small territory and the southern reaches of the human kingdom. Smaller poisoned areas ate away at their eastern border. I could see why they'd been driven underground.

The rest of the human kingdom hadn't been spared either. Smaller areas of corrupted land were marked, cutting away at their usable land. According to the map, they'd also lost access to four-fifths of their coastline. It certainly drove home why they were so desperate.

"We are here," explained Stephanie, pointing at a city labeled "Odimere" about the midpoint of the human territory, only slightly north of the southern purple region. "Our most fertile farmland is in this region, in the north."

I tried to pay attention to her explanation, but after my initial look over the map, I found myself rather distracted by what I could see through the wall. The inexplicable contents began with a carpet. It almost certainly wasn't a mere rug; it was perfectly rectangular, and the side closest to us was right up against the wall. Given that I couldn't see the walls, I couldn't be certain about the other three sides, but the front and back seemed level with this room. It looked like it covered the entire floor.

A carpet was strange enough; thus far, I'd seen the rug in my bedroom—nothing more than a processed hide, and so not at all rectangular—and that was it. Even the room in which I'd dined with the king and queen hadn't contained unnecessary furnishings. If a room used by the *king* was undecorated, what sort of room would have a carpet?

But it wasn't just any carpet. The fact I could see it with mana sight meant it was enchanted. What sort of room would have an *enchanted* carpet?

And then things got worse, because hovering in the air was a cushion. I'd hazard a guess it wasn't actually floating, but was set atop a mundane chair. I could see a substantial number of orbs of light too, but unlike every room I'd seen thus far, which contained candelabras, they were in the middle of the room, close to the

ceiling, arranged into a couple of rings. Likely attached to a chandelier.

There was no one in there, at least not within range of my mana sight. With only one enchanted chair, I couldn't guess what it was used for. A treasury would presumably contain enchanted items, but I would expect them to be *items*, not furnishings. It was too small for a throne room. With a single chair, it appeared more like an office, unless there were more and only one was enchanted.

"And so, once Fort Mertti falls, we'll be cut off from Port Hope," continued Stephanie, oblivious to my distraction. "With the demons blockading caravans moving through their territory, and dwarven territory rendered impassable by miasma and monsters, the sea route is the only way left for us to trade with the Methin Council. As they're the only territory with a sufficient surplus of food to trade, its loss will lead to rapid starvation. With the Chiral Plains overrun, we have no hope of producing sufficient food internally, even if not for the demon saboteurs sneaking to the south and burning the farmland we have there."

I tried to pay attention, even if most of the lesson seemed to be about how screwed everyone was rather than anything I needed to know to fight, but there was something niggling at the back of my mind. The princess was wearing a rather plain outfit: a blouse, skirt, and jacket. Far more practical than the ornate but dirty dress she'd been wearing during my summoning. Then why had she chosen that dress yesterday? To show it off?

I frowned as a rather twisted thought occurred to me: Maybe it was the *opposite*. I'd already confirmed these people were prepared to deceive me, but what if the nature of Mary's slavery was merely one small part of a grander plan? It would explain so many small incongruities. Stephanie's hair was long and unkempt, yet Wendy had *dyed* hers. Admittedly not very recently, judging by the roots, but not *that* long ago. Had things really grown so bad so quickly that *royalty* couldn't afford to wash properly? Or maybe she was just too busy to give it the care it needed, and there was some cultural reason why she couldn't cut it.

There was the food yesterday too. Perhaps the reason the royals

had been so reluctant to eat was because it wasn't their usual fare. Or perhaps they weren't eating due to the stress of having their kingdom invaded. Likewise, there was the way that, since arriving, I'd been kept in a small corner of the castle, escorted everywhere, and only introduced to a very limited selection of people. Was that because they were hiding the real condition of the palace from me? That *all* the rooms, except for the few I'd been allowed in, had enchanted carpets and furniture? Or it could just as easily be because I had been here for a single day, hadn't had time to meet people, didn't know my way around, and they were worried about assassination attempts.

I could think of excuses for everything. Any one thing on its own wouldn't be suspicious, but taken together, on top of Mary's collar, my hypothesis was starting to look plausible.

I needed proof, if only to reassure myself that I was simply being paranoid. I needed to get into the rest of the castle. Or maybe just *see* the rest of the castle; Magiae Visus was a useful spell in that regard. Could I do anything to increase its range? Not the sort of thing I could experiment with right now, but something to add to my nighttime training schedule.

"And so, we estimate the capital will be under siege in thirty to forty days," finished Stephanie. That wasn't "tomorrow" levels of bad, but it was a sizable landmass, and armies couldn't just teleport from one place to another, even in this land of magic. According to the lesson I'd just had, the humans' loss would come long before then anyway. Even if the demons took Fort Mertti and then stopped, the capital would still fall without them lifting a finger. There was simply no way to feed everyone, and the population wouldn't just wait to starve to death. There would be a civil war to take control of the remaining farmland. "Any questions?"

Well, since she explicitly asked, it would be remiss of me to not take advantage.

"Many. First, what are their demands?"

"That we cede to them half of the Chiral Plains," answered Stephanie, also helpfully confirming that there *were* demands and, at least on its face, it wasn't a war of outright annihilation. "But we

can’t afford the loss of that much farmland, and they know it.”

“Then what drove them to this? Christine brushed off the question last time, but what started the war?”

Stephanie’s expression flickered. It was a shame my divine gifts didn’t come with improved social skills, but if I had to hazard a guess at her thoughts, I’d go for resigned acceptance. It seemed I was finally going to get an answer.

Alas, whether it was a *true* answer was something I was unlikely to discover today.

Chapter 12: Complexity

Princess Stephanie remained silent for a few seconds more than was comfortable, then sighed. "We'll need to admit it at some point," she said. "There was a series of...*incidents* along our border. Humans crossing into demon lands and taking from their farms. There was no violence, and they never took much, hoping that the shortfall would go unnoticed. For that reason, even though the provincial nobles involved knew what was happening, they tolerated it. Alas, the demons noticed, and were understandably unhappy."

"So your farmers bulked up their production by raiding their neighbors and stealing their harvest with the blessing of their landowners?" I asked, doing whatever the opposite of propaganda was. Stephanie had obviously tried quite hard to edit naughty words like "theft" out of her explanation, and given that her efforts survived the divine translation, I felt obliged to put them back in.

"That would be a succinct way of putting it, yes."

How on earth did they expect the demons not to notice? However little they took, if demons had the same pressure on food that the humans did, they would be sure to account for every last bushel. And wouldn't their storehouses be guarded? Even if they trusted the humans not to send raiding parties, presumably they had internal crime to worry about?

Now it was my turn to remain silent for a few seconds. Stephanie's face remained impassive, but her hands were fidgeting. It was the look of someone who needed to *try* to look impassive.

"And they launched a full-scale war over that?" I asked.

"First, they demanded we turn over a quarter of the Chiral Plains in restitution, along with the heads of the thieves, but as I mentioned, we couldn't afford the loss of farmland. We refused and offered to return double the stolen food along with the heads, which was a perfectly reasonable offer. Alas, their response was the

declaration of war and doubling of their demands."

"Okay, next question: What, exactly, do you want me to do about it?"

"Uh... Stop the demons?" answered Stephanie.

"I believe he's asking for more details than that," said Christine, speaking up for the first time in the lesson. "We don't yet have a concrete plan, because we don't know how the battlefront will change by the time you arrive, but unfortunately we can't end this with the death of a single general or king. It'll be more drawn out than that. Your tasks will involve breaking sieges, picking off roving war bands, and liberating captured settlements and defensive installations. Our conventional forces will follow behind, repairing and remanning fortifications, dealing with hiding stragglers, and so on. You just need to break their main power so that we can mop up the rest."

That was half of the question that I wanted answered, but it skipped the other half completely. "And when does it end?" I prompted.

"Pardon?"

"The *end*. When do I *stop* fighting? Is my role over once they're driven back to their territory? Or do you have unacceptable demands of your own to make, and expect me to launch an invasion of my own to enforce them?"

"The demons won't surrender if they know you won't enter their territory, no matter how lenient the terms. They know we won't be able to launch a counterinvasion without you."

"So you *do* expect me to enter their territory and keep fighting there?"

"Hopefully, that won't be necessary. You just need to prove that you're willing to," continued Christine. That seemed dubious at best to me: How could I prove my willingness short of doing it? "In that regard, the more impactful your initial appearance, the better. If you show up as an overwhelming force and drive into them the certain knowledge that they have no hope, they may even surrender immediately."

It was likely that if I turned up and effortlessly wiped out half

their forces, they'd do what they could to spare the rest. Maybe. After all, a war was what solved their food shortage the last time. For all I knew, the demons would welcome the opportunity to reduce their head count and take the pressure off.

"Don't forget, it is not our place to decide when your role is over," added Stephanie. "While we can return you early, it's not within our power to hold on to you for longer than our gods deem necessary. If they decide your role is over once the invasion is thwarted, even before any peace agreement is signed, then so shall it be."

That was a good point, and didn't it actually count against my earlier suspicions? After all, if the gods decided when a hero was needed, wouldn't they have denied the summoning ritual completely if one wasn't? Or sent me back the moment I arrived? The fact that I was here implied there was some problem they wanted me to solve. Although, I supposed the problem they wanted me to solve wasn't necessarily the demons. And again, this all assumed I'd been told the truth about the history of hero summoning.

"Okay, I think that's enough answers to be getting on with," I said, already having enough material to churn over for the rest of the day.

"Then I'll leave you in Christine's capable hands," said Stephanie, signaling the end of this lesson on the logistics of starvation and the beginning of more practical training.

Despite her role being over, the princess followed Christine, Mary, and me down the corridor.

I'd almost forgotten Mary was even there. She'd simply stood in silence the entire lesson, wearing her usual gentle smile. It was no different from her usual behavior, but nevertheless, somehow the knowledge that her collar was messing with her head warped my perception of her behavior away from "well-behaved, diligent maid" to "creepy automaton." Thankfully, my mana sight had worn off partway through the lesson, the duration being about an hour, so I could no longer see the tendrils of mana invading her brain.

"Why are you following me?" I asked the princess as we reached the door of the changing room.

"I told you yesterday, I'm supposed to be your liaison," she

huffed. “I had other duties yesterday and this morning, so I couldn’t stay with you as long as I wanted, but I’m free at the moment, so I want to watch your training.”

“Well, yes, that’s fine,” I admitted, “but that wasn’t the bit I was talking about. Why are you following *me* into the *changing room*?”

Stephanie paused. “Ah,” she muttered, blushing.

“Okay, I know I said I was done with the questions, but I have to ask: Is all this deliberate?”

“Wh-Whatever do you mean?” she stammered, despite obviously knowing exactly what I meant.

“Yes, of course it is,” answered Christine, ignoring the princess. “We’re asking you to risk your life to save ours, and we can offer you very little in return. Even if we had a pile of gold to gift you, you’d find nothing to buy with it, and you couldn’t take it home with you once you were done. So, based on our history with summoned heroes, we arranged one of the things you were deemed likely to want: companionship. Princess Stephanie and I were fully willing to sleep with you, whether you considered it payment, entertainment, or simple stress relief. Believe me when I say that I am thankful you turned out not to be that sort of person, although it seems Stephanie hasn’t given up. Perhaps she’s just disappointed that she psyched herself up for nothing.”

“Lady Christine!” yelled Stephanie, whose head would have been well camouflaged in a bowl of tomatoes.

“Are you okay? Would you like to change on your own today?” asked Mary with complete innocence, alerting me to the fact that I’d frozen up in the doorway. In my defense, I hadn’t been expecting such a candid answer! Christine had struck me a mental blow I hadn’t at all been prepared for.

“Um... Yes, yes I would, thank you,” I managed, before closing the door on two members of my would-be harem. Or was it three? Was *that* why they’d provided me with such an eager-to-please slave girl? Stephanie’s comment about *other* needs popped back unbidden into my mind.

I once again had to fight down the bile that was rising up my throat, not so much because of their behavior, but because I

suspected they were *right*. How many people did I know back on Earth who absolutely *would* take advantage of them? It was a number that shrank but remained nonzero even if they knew that something was messing with Mary's head.

Was Wendy part of this farce too?

"Are Mary and Wendy in on this?" I asked once I was done changing into my borrowed armor.

"Wendy is, and Mary had no need to be," Christine answered smoothly. "I don't know Wendy's opinion on the matter beyond that she was willing to go along with it. But please don't get the wrong impression; Wendy and I are still among the best tutors you could have. By no means were we assigned to you purely based on sex appeal. After all, your willingness to fight is immaterial if you lose."

No *need* to be? As in, if I asked, it would be *expected* of Mary, no prior consent required?

"And what's your opinion?" I asked Mary. "And don't answer with 'I take my duties seriously' or something, because I know you do. What do *you* personally want? Was this what you had in mind when you sold yourself?"

Mary's eyebrows furrowed as if she was dealing with a difficult question. "I... Uh... I want what you want?" she tried, sounding uncertain about her answer. "I had no idea I'd be serving a hero, but I'm glad that I am!" she added with far more confidence. "Now I'm a part of saving the kingdom!"

"I give up," I sighed. "You lot are weird. Cute in your own ways, but still weird. Let's get on with the lesson."

"C-Cute?" stammered the princess, who had apparently left her eloquence behind back in the classroom, unable to cope with the open talk of sex.

I ignored her and followed Christine out into the courtyard, eyeing, with something that wasn't quite guilt, some scaffolding that had gone up against the damaged outer wall. A few masons were working to repair the destruction. One of them treated me to a glare that made it clear he would greatly appreciate it if I would refrain from repeating the stunt.

"Let's start with some spear work today," said Christine. "As much

as kids love playing with swords, when it comes to warfare, it's the reach of a good polearm you want."

A rather exhausting few hours followed, during which I was happy to find that my strength and speed had improved considerably in a mere twenty-four hours. Christine still had me beat on skill, but despite the weight of experience she had over me, it was obvious even to me that I'd soon overtake her.

At least until she used body strengthening, or the nebulous "other techniques" she'd referred to.

Heroic superpowers didn't make my exertion any less exhausting, though, which was fine by me. It gave me an excuse to kick everyone out immediately after dinner, claiming I needed sleep. All the more time for me to continue my training in secret.

"What the hell was that?" hissed Stephanie as she returned to the main section of the castle with Christine.

"What, precisely, are you referring to, Your Highness?"

"You told him about the harem plan!"

Christine stopped walking, giving a sigh. "Because *you* didn't give up, you didn't leave me much choice. It was obvious that he wasn't interested and valued his privacy, but you tried to force your way into his changing room. What for?"

Stephanie paused in turn, but soon resumed her walk, not answering the question.

"You can't have actually fallen for him, despite your fluster," continued Christine. "It's too soon. You must have been hoping to gain something."

"Even if you did need to say something, you didn't have to rub Mary's lack of freedom in his face like that," countered the princess without addressing Christine's comment. "He looked like he was going to throw up again, and this stupid outfit I have to wear is bad enough without being splashed by vomit."

"That is true. My apologies. I spoke too quickly, without considering his lack of common sense."

"At this point, I don't think we can risk leaving the pair alone together. If he had continued that line of questioning from earlier,

who knows what could have happened? His performance just now was utterly terrifying. Be honest with me—in a serious fight, could you beat him right now?”

“Yes, without question. I’d need to use body strengthening at the least, and maybe even battle aura, but I would certainly win. Whether that will remain true after tomorrow’s session remains to be seen; I intend to teach him body strengthening.”

“Good enough. I’ve instructed the night guard not to let Mary in unsupervised. Make sure you’re there early tomorrow. And come the afternoon. One way or the other, it’ll cease to be a concern.”

Chapter 13: More Magic

"**Maius Magiae Visus**."

The words of the spell reverberated around my room, despite the way I'd spoken them face down on my bed, mouth smooshed into my pillow and head buried under my blanket. Thankfully, I'd also hung up the fluffy hide over the door as an extra layer between myself and the guard outside. Using my new higher-tier mana sight, I peered through the wall, thankful to find him unmoving. It looked like I'd gotten away with it.

There *had* to be a way around that problem. Magic was used in a combat setting—and in a combat setting, why in the hells would you broadcast your moves to your enemy? Something to ask Wendy tomorrow; if I wrapped the question up with that sort of battlefield reasoning, it wouldn't be suspicious, and an inconspicuous way of casting mana sight without my chaperones noticing would be useful.

As hoped, combining the regular Magiae Visus spell with the "maius" modifier resulted in a superior version. The mana requirement was significant, and the single cast left me feeling some strain, but it had *worked*. I could see the guard outside in far better detail than with the regular version of the spell.

Just the guard, I realized belatedly. None of his equipment was enchanted, and the mana exclusion effect didn't extend beyond his skin. To my enhanced mana sight, he appeared completely naked. The lesser version of the spell had been so blurry that I hadn't given any thought to the fact I could see straight through clothing.

The additional detail was a nice side effect, unexpected voyeurism aside, but what I was really after was increased range. Inspecting the entire castle from the safety of my bed would have been amazing, but thankfully I hadn't set my hopes that high, or they would have been mercilessly dashed. The range was approximately doubled, which was an improvement, but still wasn't

enough to see anything of interest from my room. Mary was next door, eating, but I neither wanted to stare at her naked three-dimensional shadow nor at her magical collar. Beyond her and the guard, all that was in range were some lighting orbs in neighboring rooms.

Then again, what I couldn't see was just as useful as what I could. The fact that I couldn't see any mana beyond the normal background in my room, or any voids hanging around outside by the arrow slits, hopefully meant that my fears of being spied on were unfounded. For my purposes, this was perfect.

Plus, the mana sight let me see what I was doing with my body strengthening. Improving my image was far easier when I had some feedback, and ten minutes later I felt brave enough to take a few fumbling steps around my room.

Twenty minutes, and I was walking normally, although doubtless Christine would make some snide comment about an abnormal gait.

Half an hour, and someone *did* walk past the arrow slits, pausing when they arrived, peering in my direction. Thankfully, with my magical forewarning, it hadn't been hard to remove the rug and hop into bed before they arrived, and they moved on after a few moments. Alas, given that I saw people only as voids, there was no way to identify my visitor. I could only recognize Mary and my guard because of their locations and Mary's collar. The best I could say was that the nocturnal visitor was female and of medium height. It could have been Stephanie, but I hadn't exactly memorized her silhouette. It could equally have been anyone from among a decent chunk of the city.

That interruption seemed a decent place to stop, so I remained in bed, closing my eyes and trying to summon sleep. This turned out to be unexpectedly difficult, given that mere eyelids didn't block my mana sight, and I had no idea how to switch it off.

"Good morning," declared Mary what felt like mere seconds after I'd finally drifted off. The sunlight streaming in through the arrow slits made it clear that the universe thought it had been longer, but my body was fairly insistent that the universe was lying.

"Morning," I answered blearily. "I don't suppose you lot have invented coffee yet?"

"You shouldn't take that stuff! It's bad for you!" pouted Mary.

"Bad for me? Wait, what do you mean 'take'? Coffee is something that you drink."

"It's a rather bitter plant seed that can be crushed into a powder and taken to induce wakefulness," said Christine, who was standing in my open doorway, facing outward. "It also has a tendency to induce other things, starting with hallucinations at medium doses and escalating to heart failure."

"Huh. Translation glitch? Or do you actually crush coffee beans? Don't think I've ever heard of them causing hallucinations, though, even if you do."

"Something we have learned from previous heroes is that we have plant life that, while superficially similar to your own, differs in the details."

"Huh," I repeated, not having previously considered why a completely different world from my own had humans on it, or why most of my food had been recognizable. In retrospect, the question was obvious, although if this place had gods capable of interdimensional shenanigans, perhaps they'd just nicked a bunch of stuff from Earth, and there had been some divergent evolution since. "And the translation thingy finds the closest available match? That could prove dangerous."

"No incidents caused by bad translation have ever been recorded," said Christine, shrugging despite having her back to me. "Now, would you please get out of bed and dress? We once again have a busy day."

Feeling a little more awake, I did as requested, then ate the breakfast Mary had left on the table.

"We'll start with magic training, as per yesterday," continued Christine as I was getting ready. "Princess Stephanie and I shall be in attendance today, so please refrain from doing anything stupid. Minister Dennis wishes to meet you over lunch to discuss Mary's situation. Then you'll—"

"Wait," I interrupted, despite having a mouth full of something

that had the same sort of relation to porridge as their "coffee" had to coffee. Hopefully it wouldn't come with a side helping of hallucinations. "He does? Why?"

"As I said, he wishes to discuss Mary's situation with you. Isn't this natural, given the concerns you expressed yesterday?"

I felt I couldn't argue with that, and I imagined the meeting would prove interesting, so I waved for her to continue.

"Then there will be another session with Princess Stephanie to cover the structure of our army, the locations of our defenses, and other information that is vital for you to know before you throw yourself into battle. Finally, I'll be training you again. Given your performance yesterday, I believe it's time we started on body strengthening."

Oh... Well, that had the potential to be a problem—there was no way she wouldn't spot that I wasn't a complete beginner. Could I chalk it up to "hero bullshit"? People were already used to me casting spells on my first attempt, so hopefully it wouldn't be that strange for me to grasp body strengthening in the same way.

"Speaking of Princess Stephanie..." muttered Christine, looking down the corridor uncertainly.

"Maybe she slept in?" I suggested.

"Possibly. We'll continue without her for now. Let's meet up with Wendy, and Princess Stephanie can catch up later."

The three of us returned to the courtyard, where Wendy was once again waiting. The wall was repaired and the scaffolding gone, which seemed impressively quick work to me. Instead, a new set of black pillars had been placed at the courtyard's far end.

"Cast Conflagratio," she demanded, pointing at the row of pillars.

"What, not even a hello first?"

"Hello. Now cast! I want to see how much your mana has grown."

I held my arm above me, palm open and facing the heavens as I gathered mana, wishing I could use Magiae Visus to see what I was doing.

"**Conflagratio**!"

The far end of the courtyard erupted into flame, even though I hadn't come close to casting the spell yesterday.

Wendy whistled. "Impressive. So your mana capacity has tripled since yesterday? No, you're not even breathing heavily. It's quadrupled at the least! Can you cast it again?"

"Please don't risk knocking him out," interrupted Christine.

"Aww," pouted Wendy, a look which was far less cute on her than it was on Mary. "But I want to see what he can do. Okay, let's blast through the other spells I need to teach you, then we'll test your mana capacity properly. **Ventus Ferri**, **Terrae Columna**, **Aquae Pila**!"

A shimmering arc of green rushed toward one pillar. A spike of earth shot from the ground at a second and a basketball-sized globe of water shot toward a third. The shimmering arc did nothing, the spike shattered on impact, and the water ball splashed harmlessly.

"The images are compressing mana into a blade of air, gathering it in the ground and then having it erupt out, and exactly like Ignis Pila except with water instead of fire."

"Wait, you need to explain better than—" started Christine, before her voice was drowned out by the odd harmonics of my magic.

"**Ventus Ferri**, **Terrae Columna**, **Aquae Pila**!"

Another three magical attacks struck harmlessly against the black pillars.

"—that," finished Christine.

"Wow!" exclaimed Mary.

"Right, next up, mold mana into the air and spin it. Form rings of the same blades you imagined for Ventus Ferri. **Procella**!"

The dust whipped up around the row of pillars, spiraling into the air as the wind howled. Beyond that, nothing seemed to happen. Today's batch of spells seemed rather lackluster compared to the explosive damage we were doing yesterday, even if this particular one was quite loud.

"**Procella**!" I echoed once Wendy's cast had died down, only for the wind to whip back up again. The strain of casting it was significant, leaving me a little winded, but at least I didn't fall over.

"Hang on," interrupted Christine, shouting over the howling. "Even *I* know that was impossible. Procella is a spell on the same level as Conflagratio. I've seen the textbooks that describe the

image it requires, and it takes up an entire chapter. You can't just sum it up in a couple of sentences and have it work."

I peered at my whirlwind, which was starting to die down but still very definitely existed. I'd say the empirical evidence was fairly heavily stacked in Wendy's favor here.

"He's a hero." Wendy shrugged. "Maybe the translation gives him all the info he needs, or maybe the gods' aid lets him cast spells despite not holding a perfect image. It was obvious yesterday that he's playing by different rules, so I'm damn well going to take advantage of that. Incidentally, he's still standing upright, and as you say, that was a spell on the level of Conflagratio. Now we're up to seven times the mana capacity. Maybe even eight, given the smaller spells."

"How is that on the same level as Conflagratio?" I asked. "It didn't *do* anything."

"Didn't it? Well, why don't you cast it again?"

"No!" exclaimed Christine. "He may be upright, but he's obviously exhausted. Take a mana potion before casting any more spells, please."

Mary went running to fetch one from the stores.

"Aww," pouted Wendy. Was she *trying* to knock me out? "At least I got some good evidence. I think we're looking at a mana capacity that's increasing by an order of magnitude per day. If you keep developing at the same rate, by tomorrow, you should be able to cast the level of spells that would take a regular mage decades of training. The day after, you'll be able to cast the sort of spell that no single mage could normally cast, requiring a team working in sync. Either way, I think tomorrow's lesson is going to need to take place outside of the city."

"Outside the city?" I questioned, looking at the completely undamaged pillars we'd been using as targets.

"Outside the city," confirmed Wendy. "That black material is a type of obsidian that's immune to most magical damage. Lady Christine, if you would please demonstrate? **Procella**!"

The whirlwind whipped up once more while Christine calmly walked to the weapons rack, picked up a massive two-handed

sword, and launched it with a simple overarm throw straight at the swirling magic. It was an impressive shot, even if the sword was only made of wood.

The moment it impacted the whirlwind, there came a crunch, and a cloud of splinters burst from the training weapon. I had just enough time to spot a gouge that had been torn out of it before it crunched again, and again, and again. A dozen times in a second, chunks of wood were torn from the sword and shattered into splinters. The sword snapped in half, then quarters, then I lost track. By the end of the second, there was no sword left—only a ring of splinters spiraling around inside the spell, and even they weren't spared, continuing to be struck by the invisible blades. By the time the magic dissipated, there was nothing but dust remaining.

"Now imagine that was a person," said Christine.

"No, imagine it was an *army*, and you'd used the 'maius' modifier," said Wendy. "Underestimate green magic at your peril."

"Here," said Mary, rushing back with a mana potion. "You should hurry and drink it!" she added, mistaking my blanched face for the effects of mana exhaustion. Alas, the mana potion couldn't erase the picture that was now fixed in my head of an army of soldiers lifted from the ground, reduced to a cloud of bloody mist in seconds, with barely even time to scream.

"Well, that's tonight's sleep flown straight out of the window."

Chapter 14: Assassination

"What was so urgent that you asked my guard to wake me in the middle of the night?" asked King Edward, peering at his daughter with a mix of annoyance and confusion. Even if she was family, they were *royalty*, and barging into his bedroom in the middle of the night was just Not Done. There were procedures to follow! She'd been unable to convince the guard to let her in at night, and so had turned up again first thing in the morning and camped outside until her parents emerged of their own accord instead.

"I can't help but wonder the same," echoed Queen Janna.

"You need to call off the staged demon attack!"

"Why?" asked the king, his confusion growing. "What happened?"

"He knows Magiae Visus and body strengthening!"

"What? Are you *certain*? Wendy's report explicitly stated that she didn't teach him even a fragment of the required image, and Christine's stated that his first and only attempt at using body strengthening almost killed him."

"I saw the residual mana in his muscles myself! And he looked *right at me*. Through a *wall*."

"Mana in muscles doesn't mean much. There's a huge gap between being able to move mana into your body and being able to effectively utilize it for enhancement. And couldn't he have been looking in your direction by coincidence?"

"No way! The way he reacted, I'm certain he could see me."

"You need to calm down," said the queen. "Why don't you start over, from the beginning?"

Princess Stephanie took a deep breath, realizing that she had indeed started in the middle of her explanation. "Yesterday, after his magic lesson, he cast a spell in his room with only Mary as witness. Christine assumed it was Parvus Sanatio, but she didn't confirm it. Then, on arrival in the room you had repurposed for tutoring, he

expressed surprise while looking in the direction of the bookcase. At the time, I thought it was because he wasn't used to parchment, but now it occurs to me that *behind* the bookcase was the office of Minister Serge, which was not stripped of decorations."

"That's heavily circumstantial," pointed out the king. "And you haven't explained *how* he learned the spell."

"I don't know how. Maybe watching Wendy cast it was sufficient. Another bit of evidence is that his behavior around Mary has changed since then. He's looked uncomfortable whenever he interacted with her," added Stephanie, remembering how green he'd gone at Christine's mention of her lack of choice.

"Again, circumstantial. From your reports, he's *always* been uncomfortable with her. What about seeing you through a wall? When did this happen?"

"Last night. I was on a nighttime stroll outside and passed his room. He tracked me as I went by, the entire time I was in range."

"How do you know? Even if you were using Magiae Visus yourself, it wouldn't have let you see his eyes."

"I could see which direction his face was pointing!"

"Wait," interjected the queen. "Once again, you've skipped over some important facts. A nighttime stroll? Outside the castle without a guard? And you just *happened* to pass by his room *after* casting Magiae Visus?"

"I... I..." stammered the princess.

King Edward pinched the bridge of his nose. "You really need to give up on that," he said.

"You *promised* me! It was the only reason I agreed to put myself through—through—*this*!" She gestured downward, indicating her dirty clothing that was not at all befitting of a princess, along with her grimy hair and lack of makeup.

"I merely made an observation at that time. Nothing more."

"*What* did you observe, dear?" asked Janna coldly.

"That's beside the point right now," deflected Edward. "So far, all you have is circumstantial evidence. May I suggest the obvious? Ask Mary! Why didn't you do *that* on your nighttime stroll?"

"Because he could *see me*! If I'd stopped to talk to Mary, he

would have known!"

"Putting what promises you may or may not have made aside, I fail to see why this means we should cancel the staged demon attack," pointed out Janna.

"Because he already knows we misled him about Mary's collar, and that there exist rooms in the castle with such niceties as enchanted carpets. He'll be questioning everything. *Suspicious* of everything. Furthermore, our plans for containing him if anything goes wrong don't account for him knowing body strengthening. If he discovers the attack was staged, we're doomed."

"And *how* would he discover that? Rather, is it not more important than ever that we follow through? Giving him a reason to hate the demons will take his mind off any suspicions he may have about us. Magiae Visus will show him that the collar is enchanted, but not what it does, while leaving him with Mary long-term risks him figuring it out. Seeing a room with an enchanted carpet doesn't mean much. After the attack, have him moved to Fort Terrusarn under the guise of security and being able to safely train wide-area magic, and there won't be anything inconvenient for him to see."

"Except for all the slaves that work there."

"They aren't his. Order them to have nothing to do with him, and he won't be able to discover anything from them."

"No, it's too much of a risk," argued Stephanie. "You said it was my place to make the call on whether he would be useful, and I did. Now I'm making the call that staging the attack is too risky, and we'd be better off cutting our losses and being completely honest with him."

King Edward stared at his daughter for a few seconds, but she didn't even flinch. She steadfastly returned his gaze. "You're obviously serious," he sighed. "Very well. I'll give you a chance. Justify yourself."

"He may not know the extent of it, but he already knows we've been dishonest. Even so, he's remained fully cooperative and hasn't mentioned returning home. If we come clean now, it's possible he'll remain so. If not, at worst, he will cease to cooperate. Based on his personality, I'll guarantee he won't betray us, but will simply become

a neutral party. Meanwhile, if he discovers that we murdered Mary in an attempt to sway his decisions, he *will* turn on us, and if he's able to utilize body strengthening, Christine isn't certain she can defeat him."

"You based that on mere conjecture," replied the king. "You aren't *certain* he knows we've been dishonest. Even if he can cast Magiae Visus, you don't know what he's seen. Even if he has seen something he shouldn't, you don't know if he's realized the significance. But even if he fulfills all of those conditions, and you're right about him growing stronger than Christine, you're still missing one important fact: Him becoming a neutral party is no better an outcome than him turning on us. The end result is the same in both cases—we all die."

"That's not necessarily true. Even if he doesn't fight the demons, he'll still want to help both us and them. With his power, he'll be able to penetrate deep into the corrupted lands. He may even find a way to reclaim them."

"More conjecture. And even if he can, do you believe he'll act quickly enough to avoid the mass starvation and civil war that would result from surrendering to the demons?"

"As a neutral party, he could broker a peace. Promise the demons our land after a number of seasons, by which point he could reclaim more! With the number of lives already lost in the fighting, both sides should be able to stave off food shortages for a while."

"It's an interesting thought, but nothing more than wishful thinking. The demons have prepared for this war, and I do not believe that a hero who's unprepared to fight them will end it. We need him unconditionally on our side, and nothing you have said has made the case that our current plans are not the best way of ensuring that. In light of the possibility he's able to use body strengthening, I'll lend a member of my personal guard to the backup plan, but beyond that, I don't believe any adjustments are needed."

"Actually, she does raise an important point," said Janna. "If Thomas is capable of casting magic without an image, how will we guarantee he's not able to heal Mary? He may well succeed with a

cast of Maius Sanatio. Perhaps we should rethink the plan to have her speak to him on her deathbed."

"That, at least, will not be an issue," replied Edward. "We wanted to make this assassination attempt authentic, after all, so we've brought in a dose of devil-fire."

"Wh-What? You're going to use *that* on Mary? *Deliberately?*" gasped Stephanie, her face turning pale.

"It's what a demon assassin would use. It's what they *have* used; one of their failures is how we got hold of this dose."

"Yes, it's a good choice." Janna nodded. "Not that I'm completely comfortable with *that* being in the same castle as me, but at least it will soon be disposed of."

"No! He's going to kill us all... I want no part of this!" shouted Stephanie before fleeing from the room.

"Follow her!" shouted Edward to his guard. "Ensure she doesn't go anywhere near the western wing!"

The guard went running off after the terrified princess.

"A bit of an overreaction, surely?" sighed the queen. "Mary's collar will detach her from the pain. In any case, now that our melodramatic child has left, will you please elaborate on your 'observation'?"

"Oh, that? I merely pointed out that the crown is passed down not based on stupid reasons like who was born first and happens to have a penis, but that a wide range of factors are considered, even if that means skipping a generation."

"And having a famous hero—the savior of the human race—for a father would certainly be a major mark in someone's favor. Few things could quite match a heroic parent for bolstering someone's initial loyalty from the public," finished the queen. "So, that's all? You simply led her to believe that if she bore the hero's child, that child would inherit the crown? And there I was thinking the worst of you..."

I followed Christine through the castle corridors, so many magic words rattling around in my head that I was worried they'd start leaking out of my ears. For that matter, there was so much potion

sloshing around my stomach that I wasn't sure how lunch would fit.

"Stephanie still hasn't turned up," I observed. "Shouldn't you be worried?"

"Princess Stephanie Ricousian is the second princess of this kingdom. I may not personally know where she is, but believe me that *someone* does. Were she missing, the castle would be in uproar. Another task must have come up that precluded her from overseeing your training."

I wasn't too upset about having one less pair of eyes watching my every move, but I did wonder what sort of tasks could unexpectedly come up for a princess. Not that I had too much experience of princesses, but I imagined them spending lots of time in balls or etiquette lessons, neither of which would suddenly turn up at short notice.

Even without the princess, I still had Christine and Mary watching me. Annoyingly, I hadn't got an answer to my question of how to subvocally cast spells, despite asking while waiting for a mana potion to kick in. The nebulous response implied that there was perhaps a way, but that it was too soon to teach it to me. The cynic in me replaced that explanation with that they didn't *want* to teach it to me, just like she hadn't taught me Magiae Visus or any information-gathering spells. We'd moved on to some defenses later in the lesson, but it was still completely combat oriented.

"Here we are," declared Christine, knocking on the door of the room in which I'd once dined with royalty. "Mary, since this discussion concerns you, please return to Thomas's room to wait."

"Yes, Mistress," agreed Mary easily before doing an about turn. It seemed a bit rude to have her follow us this far just to have her do a one-eighty the moment we arrived, but at least now I was down another pair of eyes.

"Please enter," came an unfamiliar voice from inside, and Christine pushed the door open.

"Minister Dennis Banks, I present Thomas Smith, the hero," said Christine, handling introductions. The minister wasn't quite what I was expecting; he was an elderly man with a head of sparse, whispery hair, dressed in an old-fashioned woolen suit. Or old-

fashioned for Earth, anyway. “Thomas, this is Minister Dennis, Mary’s owner.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” he declared, standing up and holding out a hand.

I hazarded a guess what he was after and shook it, despite never having seen anyone shake hands on this world thus far. “Nice to meet you too,” I responded.

“Do sit down and dig in before it goes cold,” he said, gesturing to a wooden bowl steaming away on the table. “As much as I’d love to stay and chat, I’m afraid I don’t have the time. I don’t think there’s a single individual in this castle who isn’t run ragged at the moment. Except perhaps for the guards, but I’ll let them off, because standing around is their job. Besides, standing around for hours on end while remaining constantly alert is harder than it sounds. I know a few nobles who learned that lesson the hard way, skimping on their guards’ pay, hiring whoever was willing to work for a handful of bronze a day, then waking up with a knife through the heart when their guards fell asleep on the job.”

I took my seat at the table, marveling at how much the guy was chatting given that he allegedly had no time to chat. The food was stew again, but it was nourishing and hot, so I tucked in.

“Anyway, onto the topic at hand. Mary. Your request to take ownership of her isn’t possible,” he said bluntly before dipping a spoon into his stew and chewing it with gusto.

“Uh... Okay?” I hazarded. “I didn’t *request* that, as such, but I don’t know what Christine told you.”

“That you were worried about her stabbing you in your sleep. But let me tell you, you’re worrying about the wrong thing. Yes, if I ordered Mary to attack you, she would, but what about that young knight behind you? Lady Christine, were King Edward to order you to kill this young man, what would you do?”

“Kill him, of course,” she responded instantly, as if the answer were obvious.

“See? You don’t need to be a slave to follow orders,” continued the elderly minister. “We’d be in a right pickle if half our soldiers decided they would quite like to not risk their lives on the battlefield,

wouldn’t we? Not to mention that Christine would have a far greater chance of actually succeeding.”

“Did you have to be so blunt about it?” I asked my bodyguard, possibly with something of a pout. “And I would hope you’d at least make sure the orders were really coming from the king, and that he was of sound mind and had a damn good reason.”

“If I had reason to believe the orders were suspect, then yes, I’d question them,” she acknowledged.

“It’s all theoretical, anyway,” continued the minister. “Frankly, I’d be happy to turn Mary over to you, but you simply aren’t able to fulfill your legal obligations. A slave owner is required to provide food, shelter, clothing, and the like, but you cannot. As a guest in this castle, you’re dependent on us. So, since you can’t take ownership of Mary, I figured I’d do the next best thing. You expressed concern about never having met me, so here I am. Now you’ve met me. Hopefully, that’ll help put your mind at ease.”

It didn’t, really, but I wasn’t going to say that out loud. It wasn’t as if I could gauge his personality from a ten-minute meeting, most of which was spent inhaling stew. Besides, the “next best thing” wasn’t this; it would be freeing her! I’d even go so far as to claim that should be the *best* option, yet he hadn’t even mentioned it.

“Could—?” I started, intending to ask him why.

Alas, I was rather rudely interrupted by a scream.

Chapter 15: Poison

Minister Dennis flinched at the noise but recovered quickly, carefully putting his spoon down and standing up. Christine spun to face the door, crouching slightly with one hand resting on the hilt of her sword.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"Remain quiet and alert," demanded Christine, which despite not being an explicit answer, was a perfectly clear implicit one. Not that I needed someone to explain what a scream meant. My question had been rhetorical to begin with.

"You'll want to stand up," whispered Dennis. "Hard to react to an attack while sitting down."

"An *attack*?" I hissed, standing up. "What's going on?!"

"With luck, someone dropped a pan on their foot. If we're *unlucky*—"

"Quiet!" repeated Christine. "If it *is* an attack, Thomas is the likely target. Do not make us easy to find."

The sound of pounding metal boots echoed outside our room, then there was nothing but silence for several minutes while we waited with bated breath. Or, at least, *I* waited with bated breath. The other two occupants of the room remained far more professional. Christine, I could understand, but did this happen often enough that Dennis was used to it?

"I should be carrying a weapon," I muttered. Given that we'd been eating stew, I didn't even have a fork available.

"Use your magic," responded Christine. "In an indoor, enclosed space like this, use green or blue magic. Green if there's no risk of hitting me from behind, blue if you need to target an opponent through me. Under no circumstances use red."

"Well, no," I agreed. Throwing fireballs about in a building with so much wood around would just result in not having a building for

very long.

I resisted the urge to cast Magiae Visus. I didn't want anyone to know I knew it, the range wasn't great enough to see anything I couldn't hear, and Christine's professional demeanor was reassuring me that the situation wasn't that dire.

A few more minutes passed before a single set of footsteps came running up the corridor from outside. The door handle clicked, but before the door even opened, Christine blurred with superhuman speed.

The door opened *very quickly* after that, in a way that did not involve the use of its hinges.

"Knock, dammit," hissed Christine once the echoes of splintering wood and various involuntary biological noises died down. "I could have killed you!"

Wendy, who was now pinned against the opposite wall with Christine's blade against her neck and quite large splinters of wood driven deep into the stone blocks all around her, made a frightened burbling noise.

"What's going on?" added Christine, releasing Wendy and sheathing her sword. Wendy flopped to the floor. The fact that she did so with a wet squelch was a fact that, for her sake, I would never mention.

Then Wendy shook herself, the question apparently reminding her why she'd been in such a rush. "Demon attack! They got Mary!"

"Please calm down," said Dennis, who hadn't even flinched at Christine's display. "You need to explain *exactly* what's going on before we can risk moving."

"They launched some sort of device through Thomas's arrow slits, from the other side of the castle wall. It released an airborne poison. Thankfully, because Thomas was eating over here, Mary was the only one in the room, but she's in a bad way. We need Thomas's white magic."

"This is why I said we should have had you stay in an internal room with no exposure to the outside, but Princess Stephanie insisted you should have some natural light," complained Christine. "They knew your room and your schedule, but not the fact that we'd

adjusted it today. That's a relief, at least. And... I'd like to say that we can't risk exposing Thomas to Mary; there could still be poison around, especially if it's airborne, and she's only a slave. But I suspect the hero in question isn't going to accept that?"

"No way!" I confirmed. "Where is she?"

"Her room," answered Wendy.

"We'll go there directly. Meanwhile, Wendy and Dennis, you both might wish to return to your own chambers."

Dennis nodded calmly, while Wendy looked torn for a moment before agreeing, leaving just the pair of us to rush back toward Mary's room. Half a dozen knights were arrayed outside it, one in substantially fancier armor than the rest. None of them reacted, though, simply staring silently in both directions down the corridor.

"Wait here," demanded Christine of me once we reached them. "I need to do what I can to ensure it's safe for you to enter."

She slipped into Mary's room, closing the door behind her and leaving me shuddering in the middle of the protective group of faceless knights. How could I not? It had been bad enough when they'd talked about assassination as something they were simply concerned about, but to have it *actually happen*? And for an innocent girl no older than I was to get caught in the cross fire?

"You can come in," declared Christine.

Mary's room was the same size as my own, but far more sparse in its furnishings—little more than a bed with a chest at its feet. There wasn't even a nightstand; a magical candle with only a single orb of light had been placed on the floor instead. Another few knights were inside, waiting out of our way.

Mary herself was lying atop her bed unmoving, eyes open but glassy, beads of sweat rolling down her face. Most alarming was the purple tint of her skin and the dark veins visible just under its surface.



"I'm sorry, but, well, I know what this is," said Christine. "Devil-fire. Wendy must not have recognized it due to spending the war thus far engrossed in research, but I'm afraid your white magic will be useless."

"What? Why?" I demanded. "**Sanatio**!"

Far from improving, Mary shuddered, her veins writhing under her skin. She did at least regain a little light in her eyes, which turned to focus on me.

"Sorry..." she said weakly. "I have failed in my duties."

"What? How?" I demanded.

"My death...will make you sad..."

"That's hardly the most important thing here!"

At that, she actually managed a weak smile. "Do not...seek revenge..." she continued. "If you go now...before you're ready...you'll only die..."

"Revenge? Dammit, I'm not going to go running off in some sort of berserk rage to avenge your death because *you are not going to die*! **Maius Sanatio**! Maius **Maius Sanatio**!"

Once again, my attempts at healing seemed to achieve nothing, and doubling up modifiers didn't strengthen the spell any further.

"Why doesn't healing magic work?!" I repeated at Christine. "What's devil-fire, and how do you cure it?"

"The demons' weapon of choice early in the war. They imbue a fine dust with miasma, then spread it over a battlefield. Anyone who breathes it... Well, we already described the effects of miasma poisoning when you first arrived. You *can't* cure it; if you could, we could purify corrupted land in the same way. It's where the name comes from; victims feel like they're burning with no way to alleviate it. It's a cruel weapon, but I have to acknowledge its effectiveness; we lost entire battalions before we came up with defenses. But those defenses are geared toward not breathing the dust in the first place—clean air spells and such—so the demons still use it as a tool for assassinations. We never expected them to be able to smuggle the stuff into the capital, though."

I stared at Christine. I had superhuman strength and impossible magic. I was supposed to be a freaking *hero*, but I couldn't even

save one girl dying in front of me?! Miasma poisoning was supposed to twist people into monsters. Was that Mary's fate?

No, of course not. They wouldn't allow a monster in the castle.

"You should leave," said Christine, confirming my guess. "You don't want to watch what comes next."

"No."

"Please, don't make this harder on yourself than—"

"I said *no*! She is not going to die. You hear me, Mary? That's an *order*. You are not *allowed* to die!"

Mary squirmed in her bed, her expression twisting up in the way it did when I asked her to do something that she couldn't. So far, that had been because of conflicting orders, but this time she far more literally *couldn't*.

"**Maius Magiae Visus**," I chanted, not caring that I was supposed to be keeping my ability to cast it a secret, as long as there was even the slightest chance it would give me a clue. Alas, it only increased my frustration; it showed me *something*, but not anything I could make any sense of. Mana was blurring into Mary's body, no longer fully excluded. Mana was supposed to be excluded by soul, so did that imply Mary's soul was deteriorating? What even *was* a soul?

"Thomas!" shouted Christine. "Please, you're making this harder on her, as well as yourself. Do you *want* her to suffer? If we leave her like this, she'll eventually attack you, and that's not what *either* of you want."

"Miraculum..." whispered Mary, in a voice so feeble that I could barely make it out.

"Pardon?"

"Miraculum..."

"Is that a spell? A modifier? What's the image?"

Despite my desperate pleas, Mary said no more, her eyes once again turning glassy and staring unseeing at the ceiling.

Well, if that was the answer she came up with in response to my order, I damn well wasn't going to let it go to waste. Wendy seemed to think that magic did what I wanted regardless of my image, so I didn't even try. I simply pictured all the mana—every last drop that

was visible to my mana sight—rushing into Mary all at once and *making her better*.

"Don't—!" shouted Christine, but her voice was drowned out by my own.

"**Miraculum**!"

The walls hummed as the entire stone fabric of the castle shook. Dust drifted down from the rafters and danced up from the floor as the magic seized the single word from my throat and launched it out into the world with explosive force. Blood followed it as I fell to my knees, struck with the nausea of mana exhaustion and coughing up what felt like half my windpipe, but I didn't care.

Why would I, when it had worked?

"I fulfilled my duty," declared Mary from her bed, still weak, but proud. "I didn't die."

Christine simply looked on in shock.

"Please calm down, milady," said a maid of similar age and build to Mary, but this one was wearing a uniform of far higher quality, with a neck free of any sort of collar.

"How can I calm down?" replied Stephanie, continuing her ceaseless pacing of her bedroom. "This very second, my father is risking *everything*. Two minutes from now, we could all be dead!"

"I'm sure His Majesty knows what he's doing," replied the maid, who wasn't part of the conspiracy and so couldn't offer any better reassurance. The first step in avoiding leaks was to minimize the number of people who *could* leak.

"I'm certain he does too! That's what scares me! He knows the risk full well, and he's *doing it anyway*!"

The maid, well aware of her place in society, refrained from asking what "it" was.

"Screw it. I want a bath. My head feels like ants are nesting in it."

"A bath, milady?" questioned the maid, glancing around the richly decorated room. "Were you not trying to wear a mask of poverty for the sake of the hero?"

"It's already all over, one way or the other. I'm unlikely to meet him again. No need to keep on pretending."

"As you say, milady. I shall prepare—"

"**Miraculum**!"

The spell—and it very obviously *was* a spell—reverberated through the room, slicing through the maid's voice. The chandelier swayed above them, the vibrating crystals causing the room's shadows to flicker and dance.

"Milady?" queried the maid, once the noise had died down. "Do you know what that was? Shall I escort you to shelter?"

"He saved her..." muttered Stephanie. "I've never even heard of that spell before, but there's no way that was anything else. He actually *saved* her..."

"Milady?"

"Tell me, am I a good person?"

The maid blinked, partially wondering where that had come from, but mostly considering how to answer it in a way least likely to get her into trouble later. "You care for the kingdom, and you do what needs to be done," she eventually answered.

Stephanie snorted. "Only when it doesn't inconvenience me overmuch, otherwise I'd have followed Mother's advice and cut my hair. Mistreating and deceiving a stranger to save the kingdom? That's easy. Sacrificing a mere slave to save the kingdom? I can justify that to myself too. But what if the sacrifice needs to be me? I don't want to die, but I don't want to see our kingdom fall either."

The maid remained silent, well aware she had no clue what was happening and that there wasn't anything she could say that would help her lady.

"So be it," declared Stephanie. "I pray that Father is proved right, but even if not, this is an *opportunity*. If our hero can cure devil-fire... For the sake of the kingdom, we *can't* squander this chance. Father's contingencies would be a complete waste. We can do so much better. I simply need to deceive our hero one last time."

Chapter 16: Miracle

"Damn that woman," complained Wendy to herself, scrubbing her legs with a rough sponge. "Just how on edge was she? She's supposed to be Odimere's genius lady knight! How did she mistake me for an enemy when all that was between us was that flimsy door?"

The scrubbing continued, despite her skin already glowing red; it would take more than a sponge before she felt clean again. A pile of ash by the side of the bath was all that remained of her clothing, already "cleaned" via the judicious application of Ignis.

"I could have been killed! Some of those shards were a foot long, and they buried themselves halfway into the stone wall! Wood isn't supposed to stab stone like that! It was a miracle none of them hit me! If they had, they probably would've gone straight through."

The sponge abruptly stopped moving as realization dawned.

"Shit..." declared Wendy, despite no longer being covered in it. She wasn't stupid, and she didn't believe in miracles. At least, not *that* sort. When gods interfered in the world, they were generally pretty overt about it. They wouldn't protect a random mage from a few splinters.

No, there were no gods involved. If Christine should have known it was her, and none of the shards of door had hit her, the obvious explanation was that Christine *did* know it was her, and had attacked anyway, being careful not to cause any actual danger.

"So, there was no assassination attempt. It was all staged, and Christine got rid of me in case I noticed something off and said something I shouldn't in front of Thomas," sighed Wendy. "I understand why they want to keep certain things from him, but that's going too far. I hope the poor girl is—"

"**Miraculum**!"

Droplets of water launched themselves upward from the ringing

surface of the bath, but Wendy wasn't paying sufficient attention to notice. The sponge fell from her limp hand, all thoughts of morality and cleanliness alike wiped clean from her mind.

"Damn that Christine!" she yelled, launching herself out of the water and breaking into a sprint. "How dare she make me miss *that*!"

"Mana potion," I demanded.

"Wh-What?" stuttered Christine, which was novel. I was fairly sure I'd never heard her stutter before.

"Mana potion!" I repeated. "That took my entire capacity, and I have assassins to hunt."

"Please calm down. A good chunk of the royal guard is already out there hunting down our would-be assassins. If you leave the castle now, you'll only give the assassins another chance."

That was annoyingly logical. "Fine. Then shouldn't we move to an internal room, for the same reason?"

"Er, yes, that would be advisable. I don't think moving Mary right now is a good idea, but you at least should retreat deeper into the castle. You and you," she continued, pointing at two of the knights in the room. "Escort Thomas to the gray room. Wait there with him until I return. I want to question Mary about what she saw."

"Sorry, but I didn't see anything useful," replied the girl in question, who was starting to get some color back. Proper color: a rosy red rather than the unnatural purple tint. "A black, round thing came in through the arrow slit, then exploded the moment it hit the floor, and that was pretty much it."

"It's too soon to say that. You might have seen something that you think inconsequential that could nonetheless prove vital."

"Please follow me, Sir Hero," said one of the knights, his voice muffled by his helmet.

"Please don't call me that," I responded as the knight put his hand on the door handle. "It's weird. Thomas will do."

The knight didn't get the chance to respond, because someone else wrenched the door open from the other side, yanking him forward. He toppled over, hitting the floor in a metallic crash.

"What was that spell?" shouted Wendy, leaping into the room despite the fallen knight in the way. She simply used his prone torso as a stepping stone. "Who taught you *that*? What did it *do*? I've never felt so much power in a name before! You shook the whole castle!"

"I... Uh... Wendy?"

"Yes?"

"You're dripping wet and naked."

"So? I was having a bath. That's not important!"

"It, uh, kinda is."

"Bleh. If it'll get you to talk, fine," she grumbled, throwing open the trunk at the foot of Mary's bed and taking out a maid's dress from within. The room watched in stunned silence as she struggled to get it on, a task rendered more difficult by the way she was still dripping wet and things kept sticking. Didn't she know a spell to dry herself?

I couldn't help but notice that I could see nothing in that trunk other than multiple copies of the same uniform, some underwear, and a single lonely nightie. Did Mary have no casual clothes or any personal possessions whatsoever?

Christine's eye twitched. "Enough," she snapped. "Wendy, once you're done clowning around, you can accompany Thomas and question him to your heart's content."

"No, since Wendy is here, please teach me spells useful for information gathering. Is there anything I can use to scry the city? If it's not safe to leave the castle, I'll do what I can from here instead."

"Err..." said Wendy, which wasn't what I wanted to hear.

"I've already asked that you leave the cleanup to the professionals," said Christine. "I know you're eager to help in any way you can, but really, the best thing you can do right now is get yourself to safety and let us do our work."

"I won't be in anyone's way! Is this because you're worried I'll see something I shouldn't? I just used Maius Magiae Visus in front of you, for goodness' sake! It should be obvious it's far too late for that! You think I haven't noticed the mana in Mary's collar and the way it's invading her brain? You think I didn't notice Wendy's slip of

the tongue, admitting she was in the bath despite your claims they're out of commission, or the one she made yesterday when she more or less admitted being told not to teach me Magiae Visus? I've seen your enchanted carpets. I damn well know you've been lying to me, and right now, *I don't care*. So if you want me out slaying demons, find me a mana potion and *teach me*."

"Uh... Obviously I'm missing something here," said Wendy, finally moving on from my spell. "Did something else happen after I left to agitate him this much?"

"Mary wasn't poisoned, exactly," said Christine. "She was suffering from miasma exposure."

The way Wendy's jaw dropped would have been comical had I not been in such a foul mood. "How is she still alive? Wait, was *that* what that spell did? You cured someone with miasma poisoning? What mana capacity did it require? Do you think the same spell would work on land? Can you teach it to others? Where did you even learn it?"

I ignored the torrent of questioning. If Wendy wasn't going to teach me anything useful, and no one was going to fetch me a mana potion, I could at least make use of what I had. My mana sight was still active. Mary was now looking normal, mana once again expelled from her body, which had been left completely void. Nothing else in this room looked suspicious.

Looking through the wall into my room revealed hints of the attack, though. The usual blue fog of mana was tainted by purple swirls that rose from every flat surface. It was strongest at a point in front of one of the arrow slits, about halfway into the room. The taint grew weaker with increasing distance from that point. Christine had described a sort of powder-laden grenade, which would fit. I couldn't see the weapon or its payload directly, but I could guess I was looking at the fallout.

Confirming what we already knew wouldn't help, though; I needed to find who did this. The range on my mana sight—even this enhanced version—was nowhere near great enough to see through the castle's exterior wall, and even if it was, what would I expect to see? Once again, Christine's logic was sound, as much as I didn't

want to admit it. What could I do to help people who'd actually been trained for this?

The cynical part of my brain pointed out that the people trained for this hadn't managed to prevent the attack, so they obviously weren't *that* great.

Outside of the window, all that I could see within my range was a small patch of the purple corruption. Maybe some of the dust had been blasted outside?

"You shouldn't be getting out of bed. Please stay where you are," said Christine, reminding me that the rest of the room existed.

"It's okay, I'm fully recovered," said Mary, who was indeed now standing upright and showing no sign of her earlier weakness.

"That's beside the point, you—" started Christine, then she frowned. "Huh?"

"What's wrong now?" I asked. Mary's rapid recovery at least did something to dull my bad mood, and the sight of her and Wendy standing next to each other in matching dresses provided some amount of amusement.

As did the wet footprint on the back of one of the room's stoic guards.

I took a deep breath in and out as I did my best to calm down.

"Thank you, Master," continued Mary, curtsying at me. "You saved my life."

"Didn't I ask you not to call me 'master'?" I grumbled, but my heart wasn't really in it.

"Aww. Please let me? You've always been so kind to me, and not only did you get so angry for my sake, but you saved me."

"Huh?" went Wendy.

"Well, if you really insist, I guess I can cope. I can hardly turn down the first request you've made...since... Huh?"

Wait.

Mary cocked her head, apparently not seeing what the three of us were confused about.

Mana sight showed Mary as a *complete* void. There wasn't a single trace of mana within her—not even linking her collar up to her brain. Had my spell not merely cured her of miasma poisoning, but

of whatever had been done to mess up her head too? She had just rejected one of Christine's orders, and had done so in such a natural way that we hadn't even noticed it had happened!

"So..." said Wendy. "About that spell you cast earlier..."

"Miraculum," answered Mary in my place. "It's not a real spell. It's from the myth of Anypha and Sirclius."

"Sorry, *what*?" asked Wendy, once again only avoiding depositing her jaw on the floor because human anatomy didn't allow for it. "Anypha? As in the goddess of life? I, er, can't say I've heard that one."

"Mmm. It's a popular story among healers. Anypha fell in love with the mortal Sirclius, but Sirclius's brother grew jealous and poisoned him with a terrible poison that he claimed no magic could cure. Anypha rushed to his side, where a crowd of white mages was trying their hardest to help him, all to no effect. She told the mages to stand aside, declared that there was no injury, poison, or curse that magic couldn't cure, and cast Miraculum, fully healing Sirclius. Then she turned Sirclius's brother into a gerbil and decreed that all anyone would ever remember about him was his folly, and that not even his name would be recorded."

"Sounds like a goddess, all right," sighed Wendy, before peering over at me. "Heroes are such bullshit," she declared.

"Language!" snapped Mary.

"Ha. I'm liking this new attitude," laughed Wendy.

"What new attitude? Oh, Mistress, you're bleeding!" said Mary, suddenly turning to Christine. "**Parvus Sanatio**!"

Christine did indeed have a bead of blood on her lower lip. When had that happened? *How* had that happened? Had she bitten it?

"Thank you," said Christine. "Now this is all very interesting, but can we please return to the matter at hand? Wendy, please take Thomas to the gray room; you can discuss mythical spells to your heart's content while I talk to Mary. Then, once I'm done, there are some interesting accusations Thomas has made that must be addressed."

Oh... Right... I'd blurted out all that stuff in the heat of the moment, and everyone had just kinda ignored it. Why? With Mary

already healed and the hunt for the perpetrators allegedly well under control, I'd have thought my outright accusations of them lying would be kinda high priority.

"Why do you want to talk to Mary alone?" asked Wendy, a little sharply. "Just bring her with us."

"Wendy..." answered Christine, which didn't seem much of an answer to me.

"Come on. It won't do any harm."

"Is something wrong?" asked Mary, echoing my thoughts.

Yes... Yes, something *was* wrong. There was a niggling feeling at the back of my head that I was missing something important, and Christine's reminder of my accusations had given the feeling a bit of direction.

"Mary? You said that when the device came in, it exploded the moment it hit the floor? It didn't bounce or roll?"

"Yup. It hit the floor and boom."

The angle was wrong. My mana sight showed me the epicenter of the explosion, and it was too far into the room. Too far from the arrow slit. If it hadn't rolled, it must have come in at a shallow angle. But Christine had claimed it had come from outside the castle, beyond the exterior wall. The thick, *tall* exterior wall. If it had been launched over that, it would have come in at a far sharper angle. It was doubtful it would make it into the main part of the room at all, given the alcove shape of the arrow slits. Not to mention that the whole purpose of arrow slits was to be narrow enough to make targeting one from a distance difficult.

Something wasn't right here, and I was damn well going to find out what.

Chapter 17: Contingency

What were the possibilities? That Mary had mistaken what she saw? That the castle guards were mistaken about the location of the assassin? That the weapon wasn't a simple missile, but was capable of controlled flight? That magic was used to launch it *through* the wall?

Or, of course, the big one: that people were lying to me.

I didn't want to believe it. Yes, they'd lied to me before, but trying to kill someone in order to frame the demons was on a whole new level. They'd obviously expected her to die; Christine's shock at Mary's healing made that abundantly clear. In fact, she'd tried to discourage me from the beginning.

And now she was trying to get Mary alone, despite losing her original justification of Mary being too weak to move. And Wendy was being weird about it. Christine seemed stressed, which was understandable given the attack, but she'd been cool as a cucumber back with that Dennis guy. She hadn't even batted an eyelid when talking about devil-fire. It had only been since I refused to give up on Mary that her facade had cracked.

It didn't seem to be the assassins she was stressed about.

"Fine, we'll all go," said Christine, and I noticed her fists were clenched. "Since Mary seems to have completely recovered, I suppose I can question her elsewhere."

"I don't think we really need to." I shrugged, determined not to risk letting Mary out of my sight, even if only for a second. "I'm sure your talented agents outside have apprehended any would-be assassins already."

Christine stared at me, but I wordlessly held her gaze.

"Oh, I stole one of your uniforms..." said Wendy, either trying to break the tension or finally noticing what she'd done now that she'd received some information about the spell and had some attention to

spare the rest of the world. “And I ran through the castle naked. Oops.”

She gave a petite giggle, apparently not actually all that embarrassed.

“It’s okay. Just please give it a wash before you return it,” responded Mary.

“Hey, I just got out of the bath! I’m clean!”

“You’re also not wearing any underwear.”

“Ah...” said Wendy.

“Wendy!” growled Christine, but it was obviously not the lack of underwear the knight was annoyed at.

“Give it up already. He already knows, so no point pretending. Yes, the castle still has baths. I said it was a pointless idea to hide that fact in the first place: What sort of unbelievable story were you trying to spin in which we could afford to give him the services of a personal slave but couldn’t let him wash himself properly?”

“That, err, that was pretty believable, actually,” I commented. “It’s not like I have any idea of your local economy or logistics.”

“Really? I’d quite like to hear about your world someday.”

“I hope we get that chance.”

“Me too...”

The pair of us turned to Christine, whose lip was bleeding again.

“Mistress?” asked Mary. “What’s wrong?”

I had a strong suspicion—and given Christine’s reactions, it was only getting stronger—that the answer to that question was “Mary is still alive to answer questions.”

“Just to double-check, where exactly did that black sphere hit the floor?” I asked.

“By the—” started Mary, but then Christine *blurred*.

One moment she was standing there staring, wringing her hands, and the next she had crossed half the room, a hand on the hilt of her blade. Once again, a reflex I shouldn’t have had reared its head, and I instinctively started drawing on the local mana, pouring it into my body. For a brief moment, Christine’s movements seemed to slow.

Then the moment shattered. I’d already overdrawn on mana

casting Miraculum, and there was no way I had the capacity left for body strengthening. The contents of my stomach forced their way up as my legs buckled. She was going to cut Mary down, and I couldn't do a thing about it.

And then the next moment came, and she was standing in front of *me*, sword drawn.

And then the *next* next moment, and she was staggering backward after smashing into a transparent barrier that had sprung up between us, spun intricately out of mana faster than my mana sight could process.

As Christine stumbled, the three guards in the room drew swords and closed in.

"Lady Christine? What is the meaning of this?" asked one. "Did you just try to kill the hero?"

Even the span of a single sentence was sufficient for me to process events a little. They'd planned to kill Mary to silence her—to stop me from learning that the attack was a setup. If I already knew about their plan, there was no point in going after Mary anymore, was there?

The span of a single sentence was also enough for me to finish collapsing to the floor, and for my vomit to finish climbing my throat. Poor Mary. At least this time it was merely all over her room, instead of all over her.

"Of course not! He's vital to our kingdom's survival."

"Could have fooled me!" snapped Wendy. "If I'd been a split second slower with that shield..."

Those sentences gave me enough time to process the way Christine had been holding her sword, hilt raised. It hadn't been at the correct angle to swing the blade.

"She wanted to knock me out," I explained, trying to blink away the dancing lights swimming across my vision. Overusing mana was not fun.

"We have to get him out of the castle while he's weakened," said Christine, seemingly calm now that she'd made her decision. "Get out of my way."

The other knights hesitated, but Wendy did not. "No," she

snapped, stepping forward between me and Christine. "This has gone *much* too far. I refuse to be a part of it any longer."

"I... I don't know what's going on," said Mary, planting herself next to Christine, "but Master is kind. You don't need to be so afraid of him."

"This is not the time!" exclaimed Christine. "Now that he knows the attack was staged, he's a threat to the royal family."

"Then perhaps the royal family should *apologize*!" Wendy snapped back.

"Staged...?" muttered Mary. I could *see* the moment realization dawned, her eyes opening wide and jaw falling slack. "You tried to kill me!"

"You three, get Thomas to the western ritual chamber. A teleport circle has already been prepared to deal with this contingency. You may knock him out if he resists."

The knights hesitated, but only briefly, before all three started moving toward me.

"Don't you dare!" exclaimed Wendy, starting to turn, but Christine blurred once more. Another shield flashed into existence between the pair of them, Christine rebounding, but her goal was obviously simply to hold Wendy's attention.

It hadn't registered the first time, mostly on account of the way I'd thought I was about to die, but Wendy had cast both shields with no spoken incantation. There *was* a way.

Not that I had the leeway to dwell on that fact with three knights mere paces away from me, too dizzy from mana overuse to even stand.

"Don't hurt him!" exclaimed Mary, trying to get in the way, but she was only one person against three.

"We don't intend to, miss," said one of the knights, almost gently.

Unless I resisted, I added in the privacy of my head. Not that I *could* resist right then.

They had their orders, and they obviously intended to obey. Christine had outright admitted she would follow an order to kill me, and they'd merely been told to teleport me out of the castle, so why would they not? Especially since they had enough context from the

conversation to know why.

"Mary, you may go with him," allowed Christine. "I suspect he no longer desires any training from me, but perhaps Wendy will follow later."

"You screwed up, and now you just want to send your problems away for someone else to deal with?" snapped Wendy, unable to take her attention off Christine as two of the knights hooked themselves under my arms and lifted me back to my feet. I resisted in the only way I could, given my situation, which was to throw up on one of them. Alas, he remained stoic under my less-than-devastating assault.

"What I think is immaterial," answered Christine.

Of course, just like the other knights, she was doubtless merely following orders too. She'd answered that would-you-kill-me question while already in the middle of a plot to deceive me and kill Mary. No wonder her answer had come so readily; she'd long since faced such questions and made her choice.

I only had one question: Who was giving her those orders? Who had decided to trade Mary's life merely for the chance to leave me with a grudge against demons? Given where I was, and that I'd dined with royalty and had a princess following me around, it was a decent guess that the command had come from the top.

"What do you hope to accomplish?" I shouted back as the knights dragged me through the door. "Do you think I'll still cooperate after this?"

No one in the room answered.

If they had teleportation magic prepared to get me out of Odimere, they'd obviously done some amount of contingency planning, but did they really think I'd just forgive them and go hunt some demons? If I'd fallen for it, perhaps they *would* have convinced me that demons were an evil they needed protecting from, but now? I couldn't believe anything I'd been told. For all I knew, the humans had started this war. No way could I take sides in it without hearing the demons' side of the story.

These people weren't stupid. They *knew* that.

My last hope—that the guards outside the room would question

why the hero was being dragged out—was dashed when they simply stood aside, leaving the trio to carry me up the corridor. They'd probably heard everything that had been said in there. The one in fancy armor peered at me hanging limply in my captors' arms, then turned around and left in the opposite direction without so much as a word.

Mary puttered along behind us like a little duckling, obviously at a loss as to what she should do. Even if I'd broken her free of whatever mind control she was under, that didn't magically mean she could fight against a single trained knight, let alone three.

And speaking of Mary, that was an obvious answer as to what their backup plan might be. No one had denied magic existed that could override someone's free will. If I didn't want to fight for them, all they needed to do was make me.

My only comfort was that they hadn't done so the day I arrived. Instead, they'd constructed this elaborate ruse, despite being obviously willing to sink to horrific depths to con me into fighting for them. That implied there was some reason why they didn't want to. The only question was how much the equation had changed now that the ruse had fallen apart. Was mind control now their best option, or was there still some reason why they wouldn't?

"This would go a lot more easily if you would walk," said one of the knights as we reached a staircase.

"I *can't*," I pointed out. "I can't even stand upright on my own, let alone walk. If you want to give me half an hour to recover, then sure."

After all, given half an hour to recover, I'd bet I could hit this castle with a pretty good Conflagratio. Which presumably was the reason Christine was in such a rush to get rid of me.

The ritual chamber Christine had mentioned turned out to be the room I was first summoned in, and manhandling me up five flights of stairs while wearing plate armor was sufficiently logistically difficult, even with the three of them, that by the time they reached the top I *had* recovered enough to walk. Not that I intended to make their lives easier by admitting it.

The question that remained was whether I'd recovered enough to

fight back.

Through my mana sight, I could see five people in the room carrying a number of magical items and vials. There was also a complex circular pattern occupying a large section of the floor. No way could I fight against that many in my current state. But perhaps I didn't need to.

One of my escort trio pushed open the door while the other two carried me through. Once again, I was thrown by the way mana sight didn't show clothing; of the five waiting in the room, only one was a knight. The other four were mages dressed in robes of blue, green, red, and brown, who stood in a square outside of the floor's magic circle.

"Damn," said one of them. "Lady Christine really screwed up, then?"

"Bah, you felt that magic as strongly as the rest of us. What would you have her do? It was foolish to push a hero like that. Just be glad casting it seems to have left him wiped."

"Quiet, you two. Let's get him out of here before he recovers enough that revenge starts looking like an option."

"Too late for that," I answered. "**Parvus Ventus Ferri**."

Chapter 18: Fight

It wasn't really any fantastic revenge. It was certainly no Conflagratio. I had only harnessed the smallest trickle of mana and produced from it a blade of wind smaller than my hand. I doubted it would do much damage to anyone, short of a perfect hit to a soft target like the throat or an eye. Given the way all four mages reflexively cast Scutum, and the fact all four knights were wearing plate armor, there was no way it would harm them at all.

It hadn't been them I was aiming for.

My anemic magic slammed into the floor, neatly bisecting a sigil that was glowing particularly brightly to my mana sight. A shower of sparks erupted from the broken sigil and the entire pattern burst into light, flickering for a bit, then fading away to nothing as the mana bled away.

"Crap," declared one of the mages.

"Sorry," said the knight closest to me, drawing back an arm. It was nice of him to give me prior warning, so I put it to good use by ducking under his punch. The urge to use body strengthening again was back—to simply pull mana into myself and overpower my opponents—but I knew that was a bad idea. Even the cast of the reduced wind blade had nearly wiped me out again. Thankfully, the knight was no Christine, and I could dodge with my own power.

I couldn't really fight back, though. Punching someone wearing plate armor with a bare fist sounded like a great way to break my hand. The best I could come up with was to grab his extended arm and shove him into another knight. The pair went down in a clatter of metal.

"What do you intend to do?" asked one of the others, maybe trying to be reasonable or maybe just buying time for the pair to recover. "Are you going to fight the entire royal guard? We don't want to hurt you, just ensure the safety of the castle."

I didn’t see any advantage in answering his question; instead I barreled at one of the mages, grasping for a glow I could see with my mana sight.

“**Scutum**!” yelled the mage, shocked at being targeted.

The expected shield sprang up, but I’d seen enough mage shields to know how to react. Scutum produced a simple, two-dimensional square. It was easy enough to pirouette and sidestep it. I continued exercising the ridiculous dexterity I’d been gifted with as a hero, reaching into the mage’s robes and pulling out a vial visible to my mana sight. Thankfully, it was the exact shade of green I’d hoped for.

“Draw swords!” shouted one of the knights as I downed it.

“**Ventus Ferri**!” shouted a couple of the mages, leaving me to desperately dodge while waiting for the mana potion to kick in. Flakes of stone burst from the wall behind me where the blades of wind impacted.

Mary screamed from where she’d been standing near the door as she covered her face with her hands, protecting herself from the debris.

A knight stabbed at me, but this time I let my instincts take control, running mana through my muscles, strengthening my tendons. Toughening my bones.

Toughening my *skin*.

I caught the blade of the sword, stopping the thrust dead. A rivulet of blood ran down my fingers, my reinforcement not sufficient to completely prevent it from cutting me, but the small wound was worth it to see the look of shock on the mages’ faces. It was only a pity I couldn’t see the knights’, hidden as they were.

Then I punched my attacker with my bare hand. He went flying backward into a wall, his breastplate crumpled into a shape more reminiscent of a car that had just been in a particularly nasty traffic accident than armor.

“**Sanatio**,” I chanted, because as badass as that had been, I’d been correct about punching sheets of metal being a great way to break my hand.

“He can use battle aura?!” yelled one of the knights.

"No, it's body strengthening!" shouted one of the mages, who had cast Magiae Visus at some point in the confusion.

"Like hell it is! He just *caught* Dave's sword!"

"Oh? You people have names?" I asked, only to be ignored.

"I swear! He's just using several times the usual amount of mana!"

"What a monster!" exclaimed another of the knights, making a stab in coordination with another rain of wind blades from the mages. He was far faster than the previous attempt, and my mana sight showed that all three upright knights were running mana through their bodies.

"**Scutum**!" I shouted. Despite my never having cast the spell before, my barrier snapped into place, deflecting the magical attacks while I sidestepped the thrust, once more grabbing the knight's arm and this time tossing him. He impacted a wall, upside down, hard enough that I doubted he'd be getting up again anytime soon.

Mana sight was useful for confirming that too; I saw his body strengthening flip off, the mana bleeding back out of him.

That still left the fight as one against six, and I no longer had the element of surprise. I'd already used body strengthening, so I was out of nonlethal tricks. I did have the option of a Procella cast followed by grabbing Mary and running for our lives, but they were doing their best not to kill me and I felt it only fair to return the favor, lest they change their minds.

"**Ventus Ferri**!" shouted one of the mages again, and I tensed to summon a new shield, only for his magic to shoot off in the wrong direction. One of the knights grunted in surprise as it impacted him from behind. Blood splattered as the magic drove into his leg. No way was it a miscast; it had slammed into the back of his knee, where the armor was thinnest, cleaving metal and flesh. It didn't come out the other side, but it had obviously bitten deeply, and the knight collapsed as the half-severed leg gave way, blood pooling around it.

"What the hell are you doing?!" yelled another of the mages.

"What do you think?! Do *you* want to fight that monster? No way! I'm siding with him!"

Another of the mages jumped out of the window, which seemed a brave move given that we were five stories up. Perhaps he knew a spell that let him fly?

The last standing knight dropped his sword, raising his hands in surrender.

"What, you too?" said the apparently loyal mage.

"I can't win, and if he's not treated soon, Kevin is going to bleed out."

"And how many other people will die if you let Thomas roam free?!"

"None. He's holding back, and I have no intention of escalating this further."

"What about you?" continued the mage, turning to the fourth mage, who hadn't really done anything all fight.

"I'm... Uh... I'm..." he stuttered as he stepped backward, then he turned and followed his colleague out the window.

"Fine. Get out of here, hero," said the only loyal mage, giving up in turn. "With all this noise, reinforcements must be on their way. You won't get far."

I ushered Mary out of the door, glad none of them had targeted her or attempted to take her hostage. Then again, given what had started this fight, they were probably all well aware of just how much that would escalate things.

"**Parvus Sanatio**," I chanted at the bleeding Kevin on the way out, in the hopes things would continue to stay relatively civil. Perhaps healing my enemy wasn't the best idea, but Parvus Sanatio was no Miraculum. I very much doubted it would get him back on his feet, but perhaps it would save his life.

"Uh...Master? You just attacked royal knights," said Mary as the pair of us descended the staircase in something of a hurry. Thankfully, despite the promises of the mage, no reinforcements showed up to interfere.

"I am aware, but those knights were part of a plot to kill you, and to deal with me somehow if the plot failed. I'd rather risk getting into a fight than discover what 'dealing with me' entailed. Now, I don't suppose you have any idea where the king would be at this

time of day?"

"No, sorry. I've never been to the main part of the castle."

"Can you at least get us to the main part of the castle without going back down the corridor our rooms are in? I'd rather not bump into Christine right now."

"Mmm. Me neither. Follow me!"

I did so, and we ended up at a door guarded by a single knight. Despite his helmet, he radiated an impressive amount of emotion at seeing the pair of us. Mostly shock and fear.

"If you two are here on your own..." he started.

"Yes?" I asked, when he didn't continue.

"Never mind; it doesn't matter where your escort has gone. I have my orders. If you show up without an escort, I'm not to engage under any circumstances, and should you desire it, I'll escort you to the throne room."

Orders?

"You guys had a *second* contingency plan for if your first contingency plan failed? What is it? Using a massive room of the palace to stage the biggest ambush you can manage?"

"I believe the king is in the throne room alone. The assumption was that if you showed up unescorted, people are already dead, and he would rather keep the death toll to the minimum."

"Master didn't kill anyone!" denied Mary, pouting cutely. "He *healed* one of you!"

"Healed? Well, if we don't have a rampaging hero in our castle, I, for one, am glad. Would you like me to lead you to the king?"

Yes, I would. Alas, just because that was what was offered didn't mean it was what I would get. He could easily lead me into a trap. If I asked for directions instead, he could just direct me into that same trap. If I went in on my own, I'd just get lost, and then probably stumble into a trap.

"Yes," I conceded reluctantly, not really having any alternative.

The knight opened the door, revealing the corridor behind. A thick carpet covered the floor from edge to edge. Tapestries decorated the walls. Doors were finely carved. It was brightly lit by glowing orbs hung from the ceiling in crystal chandeliers.

"Wow..." gasped Mary.

"Wow," I agreed. "That's some difference."

The knight led us down the opulent passageways. None of the doors were open, but I could see enough with my mana sight to know that they hadn't simply decorated one corridor. Besides, why would they? It would be a rather interesting interior design choice.

The corridors weren't completely deserted. We passed an occasional official moving from room to room with bundles of parchment. Some of the more ostentatious doors had guards outside. In one corridor, a couple of maids were chatting. Despite the variety of occupants, all reacted in the same way upon seeing us: confusion. There was no fear. They obviously had no idea what was going on, but seeing a couple of strangers escorted by a knight was merely unusual, not a reason to panic.

"Hey, that's not fair. Their uniforms are far nicer than mine," complained Mary.

"Really? *That's* the bit you're going to focus on?"

"Obviously. I have absolutely no idea whatsoever what's going on, so you worry about all this complicated hero stuff, and I'll worry about simple maid stuff."

I failed to suppress the laughter, emitting an embarrassing snort. "If it helps, I don't know what's going on either."

"We're here, Sir Hero," said our guide, stopping outside the biggest doors yet. We'd come in from the side, but a wide, straight corridor ran from them right up to what was obviously an exterior door, light shining in through a glass window above it.

Both doors looked very much like they should be guarded, but the area was deserted. There was no one within range of my mana sight, even in the room we'd been directed to. That didn't mean much; a throne room would presumably be large enough that my range didn't span it.

With a nonzero amount of trepidation, I shoved open the door.

In one respect, at least, our guide had been incorrect. The king was not alone. At the far end of the room was a pair of thrones upon which both king and queen were seated. They looked vastly different from the last time I'd seen them. The queen's hair shone, and she

wore a resplendent dress of such a length and bulk that she was likely to need aid getting up from her throne, possibly in the form of a crane. The king was little better, wearing a jeweled breastplate, red trousers, and a purple robe. It was an outfit that screamed "I am king." In this throne room, he could get away with it, but in any other setting, he'd have looked like a complete dork. Both wore crowns encrusted with jewels. There was not a single misplaced crease, nor speck of dirt or grime, between them.

And in front of them, kneeling on the floor, still with her grimy hair but with her face cleaned up and dressed in an elegant gown, was Princess Stephanie Ricousian, staring straight at me with eyes of determination.

"I'm sorry," she started, which would have been a promising opening, if only I could have believed her.

Chapter 19: Admission

"Oh? What are you sorry for, exactly?" I questioned the princess as I walked slowly down the aisle, keeping my eyes open for an ambush. The throne room had far too many pillars for my liking, and parts of my brain were insisting there was a squad of crossbowmen hiding behind each one. More logical parts insisted that if an ambush was going to happen, it would have happened *before* they let me get within spell-casting range of the king and queen, but I had no intention of trusting wholly to that sort of logic.

"I lied to you. Misled you. I treated the life of someone you considered precious as a mere tool to use and discard. If you'll permit me, I'll explain my reasons, and if, after that, my death is required to satisfy you..."

She reached into a sleeve of her dress, drawing out a short dagger and placing it on the floor in front of her. She was certainly going all out for this performance.

"All I ask is that you do not hold accountable those who merely followed orders," she continued. "The responsibility is mine alone, and I will not see others suffer for it."

We had a lot to say on Earth about people who "just followed orders." A great amount of evil had been committed by such people, and "I was just following orders" was a very poor defense both in my mind and in the eyes of many laws. But if she wanted to monologue at me, I saw no reason to stop her. "Explain away, then," I invited.

"The root of the problem is that heroes have typically lived peaceful lives up until their summoning, so when I claimed us to be days away from the destruction of our kingdom, you had no frame of reference with which to evaluate the claim. Instead, you could only use what was available, applying intuition to what you saw around you. If I'd made the claim in silken clothes, in a chamber of

gold and jewels, with a bustling population going about their business outside of the window, would you not have been less inclined to believe me? You would have questioned how we could have such wealth if we were 'days from destruction.' Would you have waited around while we gave you hours of lectures on the production capacity of our weaponsmiths? Of the quotas imposed by the dwarves to keep our purchases from bankrupting their gold mines or emptying their weapon stockpiles and leaving them vulnerable? Of the logistics of food transport, and how the loss of our northern farmland would lead to certain widespread starvation and civil war months or maybe even seasons later, but would not have a great immediate impact? Would you have listened, or would you have demanded we send you home?"

"I wouldn't have demanded you send me home, for exactly the same reason as I didn't in this reality," I answered. "I didn't trust you. The summoning left you in a terrible state, and yet you talked of casting it again. I had no frame of reference in which to judge magic either, but an intuitive assumption was that sending me home would take just as much effort as summoning me. Would you really send me home, if that were the case? You could summon a new hero much faster if you simply killed me. I stayed because I deemed it the safest option, and because I thought it likely I could do some good whether or not you were lying to me."

The three members of royalty frowned, apparently not having expected that answer at all. It was the first movement I had seen from the king and queen, neither of whom had spoken since my arrival. Stephanie kept saying "I," claiming all the responsibility for herself. Had she really made these plans on her own? The king and queen had obviously been aware, but it was true only Stephanie had been in that summoning chamber.

Was she really the mastermind behind everything? Or, given how easily they were prepared to discard Mary, were the king and queen equally not above throwing away their own daughter as a scapegoat?

"So, you didn't trust us from the beginning," continued Stephanie, giving a self-deprecating smile. "Wow, I thought I'd finished

discovering new ways in which I'd screwed up."

"That explains the display of poverty, but I'd more or less guessed your reasoning there. I can guess your reasoning for today's farce too; you wanted to make me see the demons as evil, so I'd have less hesitation about killing them."

Stephanie nodded. "Yes. The problem is that you're too well protected here. Make no mistake; the demons *would* have made such an attempt on your life were they able, but we did our job too well. Too few people know of your existence, and you haven't left your small corner of the castle. We didn't leave the demons an opening to find out about you, let alone to attack, but you didn't know that. You could easily mistake it for the demons not *wanting* to attack."

"That explains your motivation, but it's not the part of the 'why' that I'm interested in."

Princess Stephanie nervously licked her lips, but she didn't break eye contact. "Because one life is an acceptable sacrifice to save hundreds of thousands. As a member of royalty, sometimes I need to make difficult choices. Choices that cost lives. I do not believe that my choice was wrong."

"Some apology this is," I snapped.

"Apologizing for my actions and believing those actions to be justified are not mutually exclusive."

"Perhaps not, but that wasn't what I meant."

Stephanie looked at me in confusion, obviously not comprehending my point.

"I think he's telling you to apologize to Mary, dear," spoke Queen Janna.

Stephanie's gaze flicked over to Mary, the princess displaying nothing but surprise and confusion. "I apologize to you too, then," she said, but it was obvious she didn't understand why.

The horrible thing was that from what I'd guessed of how the slave collars worked, Mary *would* have been a willing participant in all this, had she only been asked. The pain and death would have been unimportant. She would have simply been happy to fulfill her duty. Presumably, the only reason she wasn't asked was because

they wanted me to watch her die, and they didn't want to risk her giving anything away.

Urk... *That* was why Christine had wanted to enter her room without me. It wasn't anything to do with safety; she needed to tell Mary what to say to me!

"So, was your explanation for how the war started a lie too?" I asked.

"No, although I admit I misled you a little. I said the local nobility were aware of the plot. That was because they ordered it. I swear they came up with it on their own; it was not ordered from above."

"My daughter requested to handle this audience, but please let me interject here," said King Edward. "A part of the blame for the situation lies with me; I ordered the nobility to find some way to increase their production. I did not expect them to resort to theft to accomplish that order."

Why had she hidden that fact last time? The involvement of nobility would have explained why they'd thought they could carry out the theft unnoticed, given the increased resources the provincial nobles could wield compared to a group of farmers.

Though actually, that was a good point. A squad of knights setting foot on foreign soil was rather more serious than a group of bandits. It could go some way to explain how things escalated to war.

"So, now what?" I asked. "You expect stabbing yourself to be enough to make me forget all this, and that I'll head off on my merry way to kill demons for you?"

"I accept that we've destroyed your trust, and I understand if that means you're unwilling to fight for us," acknowledged Stephanie, taking back over from her father. "However, perhaps you no longer need to. I am well aware of what Mary was poisoned with, and what it means that she's standing behind you now, alive and well. Ironically, your actions today have brought us a hope that extends far beyond today's war. Please, perform that same miracle on an area of corrupted land. Prove that you can purify it, and...we will surrender to the demons. It will hurt, and the short-term difficulties will be immense, but if we survive them, we'll have a

hope for the future greater than any time since the dragons first came."

"I can certainly do that much," I agreed, somewhat taken aback by the sudden twist. It was a big jump from curing one person to clearing enough land to make any difference to the food situation. "But don't you risk me being sent home by the gods the moment you surrender?"

All three members of royalty relaxed at my agreement, serious faces softening into relieved smiles.

"No, because cleansing the land wasn't the problem you were brought here to solve. We wanted you to save us from the demons. If you were taken back after our surrender but before the work of restoring our land was complete, you wouldn't have fulfilled your role—by any measure, the demons would have destroyed our kingdom."

"Very well. I'll see what I can do."

"Then only one point remains before we can put today's nastiness behind us," said Stephanie nervously. "The matter of my punishment. I put my life in your hands. Should you wish it, I shall slay myself here, or if you prefer, you can do it yourself. If that's not enough for you, and you wish to strip me of whatever honor I have remaining, we can arrange a public execution. Or, given your aversion to death, perhaps you would prefer other options? Given my actions toward Mary, perhaps you would consider it poetic justice to enslave me. Or have me relinquish my title of princess and be thrown out of the castle as a commoner."

"You want *me* to decide that?"

"Of course. By our law, I have done nothing wrong. By the standards of nobility, the fact that I failed my task is enough to warrant punishment, but that would be an internal family matter and would certainly not result in death. Had I succeeded, I would only be praised. It's your personal justice we must satisfy here. I already told you, I am prepared to sacrifice one life to save our kingdom, and if that life is mine, so be it. I will do whatever is required to ensure the best chance of your success at reclaiming our land, and winning back your trust is a vital part of that."

"That's some serious determination you have there," I said, striding forward. She didn't flinch as I picked up the dagger, remaining kneeling and staring straight forward, but I didn't miss the sweat beading on her forehead.

"Don't you two have anything to say here?" I asked the king and queen.

"As a father, there is much I want to say. As a king, duty demands I hold my tongue."

"Are you sure?" I asked, gripping Stephanie's excessively long hair and pulling, lifting up her chin and exposing her throat.

"M-Master?!" exclaimed Mary.

Stephanie's breathing accelerated, but she still didn't speak. Likewise, though King Edward was gripping the arm of his throne so tightly that his knuckles whitened, he didn't say anything.

"In this, the king and queen of Ricousian recognize and respect the decision of Princess Stephanie Ricousian," declared the queen, remaining somewhat calmer than her husband.

How could any mother remain so calm in this situation? Queen or not, there should be *something*. I couldn't believe she was that ice cold toward her daughter.

And then the reason for her calmness smashed into me like a brick.

All three of them knew I was bluffing.

Stephanie had pretty much admitted it outright by referring to my aversion to death. She already knew me too well. She'd arranged the attack against Mary because she knew it would take something of that scale to get me to consider attacking demons. She was well aware of my opinion on slavery too. She'd listed off a bunch of horrific punishments in the full knowledge that I'd never carry them out, followed by the one I was actually likely to choose. Yes, she was sweating, but there was an antagonistic, armed hero looming over her. However certain she was that I wouldn't actually hurt her, the autonomic response to having a dagger waved around near her exposed throat couldn't be overcome by logic.

She probably *was* scapegoating herself to protect her parents, or whoever was actually coming up with these plans. No, scapegoating

was the wrong term. It didn't count if she expected to get off relatively free. Get her disowned and kicked out of the castle? Did I have the leeway to check up on her every week and ensure her parents weren't slipping her a stipend? Of course not! And what about once I went home?

Even after all of this, these people were *still* trying to manipulate me.

The worst part of it was that I could understand why. This audience, as much as anything, had convinced me that not a single person in this room was malicious. They were simply pragmatic and logical, willing to put the needs of the many ahead of the needs of the few, regardless of the impact on the few.

"Fine, I've decided," I declared, and swung the dagger.

Chapter 20: Punishment

Stephanie's head sprang forward, suddenly released from the grip I had on her hair.

Not that I'd let go; her hair was still firmly in my hand.

"Wha?" she gasped, feeling at her head. "My *hair*? You cut off my *hair*?"

I didn't answer, but kept a close eye on her face, and so I didn't miss the moment her confusion briefly gave way to a smirk before she schooled her expression back into something flat and emotionless. That was the smirk of someone who had been proven right. Well, tough for her; she was celebrating prematurely. However small and fleeting it had been, that smirk had sealed her fate.

"Yes. As I said, I understand your reasons. As far as I'm concerned, taking the hair you have such pride in is punishment enough for what you did to me."

"Then—"

"Ah, but there's still the question of what you did to *Mary*," I continued, without giving the princess a chance to speak. The obvious thing to do was to give Mary a chance at demanding restitution, but I couldn't do that to the poor girl. A slave, pronouncing judgment on a princess, in front of the king and queen? Putting aside any brainwashing, even a completely normal person would be far too terrified to do anything but feign forgiveness. No, she'd suffered enough. I needed to respond myself, but that just put me straight back into Stephanie's trap... The thought of demanding her life, whatever she had done, sickened me. Particularly since I wasn't convinced it had been her.

"You insist that you're the one that came up with the plan? The mastermind behind all this?"

"I swear on this kingdom that the decision to have Mary killed came from me."

Then, lying or not, there was nothing I could do. I couldn't exactly insist on punishing the king without any evidence. Conversely, I wasn't going to punish her with something I couldn't take back if new evidence did come to light. Something reversible, yet easily verifiable and far harsher than she was banking on. The answer was obvious enough, and, as Stephanie herself had pointed out, rather poetic.

"Very well. Luckily for you, as willing as you are to take a life, I'm too soft for that sort of thing. Let's go with your other suggestion: enslavement. You can spend your life working alongside the girl you tried to kill."

Stephanie paled.

"If... If that's what you demand..." she stuttered.

"Oh? You're not trying to back out?"

"Of course not!" she denied, shaking her head.

"Interesting. You might actually win a little of my respect back after all, then. I was expecting you to come up with some excuse when I didn't pick the punishment the three of you expected me to."

"As if I'd dare to lie to you again after today's farce! Yes, I was almost certain that you wouldn't, but even if you'd demanded public execution, I wouldn't have backed out. I'd have gone out with my head held high, knowing that I was doing my duty for the kingdom."

"An assertion that will never be put to the test, but if you're being honest, I respect that too."

"We'll take care of the arrangements," said Queen Janna. "Please be aware that there's an acclimatization period involved of up to half a season, so if you're expecting her to turn up tomorrow collared and ready to work, you'll need to temper those expectations. You can ask Mary about it, since she's been through the process, but you'll need to ask Wendy for the full details of what it involves."

"I will," I agreed. It was about damn time I found out what they were doing to their own citizens.

"As... As a father, I must—" started King Edward.

"Father! Don't!" snapped Princess Stephanie.

"But... You..." he stammered, clutching his head. "Very well. If this is what you want, I won't say anything further."

He took a bell from an alcove in the throne and rang it.

"Your Majesty?" called the knight who had guided us here, stepping into the throne room.

"Please guide Thomas back to his room. Hopefully, you'll find Christine and Wendy still there. Tell them that the situation has been resolved amicably, and that they should resume Thomas's lessons with a focus on combating monsters rather than demons. Also inform them that we'll be sending an expedition into the corrupted lands as soon as logistics permit, with the goal of purification, and that I require an audience later."

"Yes, Your Majesty," agreed the knight, bowing politely.

"We'll need to see about new, more appropriate quarters too. We'll have something arranged by the time you return from the first expedition," he continued to me.

"It's not like I need carpet, but I wouldn't say no to some less scratchy clothing. Mary commented that the maids in this section of the castle had better uniforms than her too."

"That can certainly be rectified easily enough." He nodded.

"Ha. Then perhaps you could consider giving her an actual salary as well. Any other lies or deceptions anyone would like to get off their chests before I leave?" I asked.

"No."

"Then I'll be off. And if you can actually be honest for a bit, perhaps we can make this work."

"You have my thanks for your understanding."

The audience over, Mary and I left the throne room. "That went better than expected," I commented as we followed the knight. I wasn't entirely sure what I *had* expected, charging in like that. I'd been rather cross at the time. Whatever it was, though, I hadn't thought it would end so anticlimactically.

Not that the princess would consider it as such. She obviously didn't think her punishment a light one. An acclimatization process that, depending how long a season was, was probably over a month in length? I was almost afraid to ask what it entailed.

"What was that about an acclimatization process?" I asked Mary.

"They had us serve pretend masters for a while," she answered.

"It was really boring at the start, and a bit odd in the middle, but I got used to it quickly. They were always asking us lots of questions about how we felt about things."

That didn't sound too bad, except that I had my suspicions about the reason it had grown less boring.

"Umm... Maybe this is an insensitive question, but you do know that collar is messing with your head, right?"

"Of course! It's not a secret. Although, hmm... Mine doesn't seem to be working right recently. I wonder if it's broken?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you're doing your job perfectly. You don't need something like that to help you."

"Thank you, Master," she beamed, her walk turning into more of a skip for half a corridor as she bounced along in happiness.

Whatever I'd done to her obviously had some impact, but I wasn't convinced she was "fixed." Then again, even without her head being messed with by magic, the fact that her superiors had tried to murder her would be pretty mind-breaking. Especially since she needed to continue working with them. The fact that she was happily skipping along behind us rather than cowering in a corner somewhere was enough that I didn't want to ask too many questions, lest she recover fully and realize the horror of her position.

"Wendy and Christine were mid-fight when I left. I hope they can both still work together."

"Miss Wendy better have won!" exclaimed Mary, pouting. "Mistress Christine is mean."

"I'm afraid that in an enclosed space, in a one-on-one fight, Lady Wendy would not stand a chance against Lady Christine," said our guide knight.

Mary stopped skipping and started running.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "I doubt they had a serious fight. Like me and the knights upstairs, they both had too much to lose if things escalated that far. All Christine was doing was stopping Wendy from interfering with the knights who carried me upstairs."

Mary slowed back down, and indeed, once we reentered the room, we found the pair still there, doing nothing more than glaring

daggers at each other, with no sign of the six knights who'd stayed behind.

"Looks like this is your victory," said Christine, who was facing toward the door and hence was the first to spot me.

"Huh?" asked Wendy.

Christine just pointed.

"You expect me to fall for that? As if I'm going to take my eyes off you!"

"Ummm... Wendy?" I called. "It's fine."

At the sound of my voice, Wendy *did* spin around.

"If you escaped, why in the hells did you *come back*?" she gasped.

"It's not like I have anywhere else to go." I shrugged. "I had a nice chat with your king, who admitted giving the order to have Mary killed, but he was very apologetic about all the deception. We came to the mutual agreement that I wouldn't involve myself in your war but would focus on using Miraculum to reclaim corrupted land instead."

"What?" asked Mary, peering at me in confusion.

"I am surprised you forgave him so easily," said Christine.

"But it wasn't him..." said Mary.

"Yes, it was. I wasn't certain earlier, but Christine was nice enough to confirm it for me."

Mary's mouth opened and closed comically as she processed that. "They *lied*? *Again?*"

"At this point, I suspect it's pathological," I sighed. "I'm not sure they *can* stop. Still, you saw the king. Stephanie's punishment was painful for him too."

"Uh... Sorry, but what's going on?" asked Wendy. "More lies? Punishment? What did those fools do this time?"

"King Edward didn't actually apologize at all. Stephanie claimed it was all her idea, that no one else was involved, and that she should be the only one punished for it."

Christine gritted her teeth, realizing she'd just spoiled the royal family's latest plot.

"Hah. So what was she punished with?" continued Wendy.

"Enslavement."

Christine's mouth dropped open.

"Wow. Harsh," grinned Wendy. "I'd make a snide remark like 'Let's see how she likes being on the other side,' but the problem is that by the end, she *will*. Those people are good at what they do."

"I think it's about time you explained to me what it *is* that they do," I commented. "But first, this poor knight is waiting patiently to pass on a message, and we're just standing around chatting."

The knight passed on his message.

"Well, that's it. I am officially depressed," declared Wendy.

"Why?" I asked, that not quite being the response I expected.

"Let's see. Reason one: I need to continue working with that overly loyal bitch."

"Language!" complained Mary.

"Oh? I think calling her a female dog is perfectly apt. She's nothing more than a big, loyal watchdog, unable to think for herself, and she doesn't even have your excuse that her ability to think for herself was carefully excised."

"Better than betraying my country at the drop of a hat just because I don't agree with a decision made by a superior," snapped back Christine.

"Please save the bickering for later," I sighed.

"Fine. Reason two: I have spent my entire life searching for a way to purify our corrupted land. Admittedly, I'm still young, but even so, it was a task deemed so important that the fact our kingdom was at war was deliberately kept from me so that I wouldn't be distracted. You have no idea how many groups are working on the problem, official or clandestine, or some of the methods that are tolerated toward that end. And now you and your hero bullshit found a way to do it *by accident*. A problem that the best minds on the continent have failed to solve for centuries, and you did it without even trying. And I've been ordered to help you. Even worse, I've not been ordered to help with the purification, or anything scientific. They just want me to teach you magic to defend yourself against monsters."

"Okay, yes, I can see how that's a little demeaning," I agreed. "On the other hand, remember that nothing has been confirmed yet.

We haven't tried to use the spell on corrupted ground. It might do nothing, or it might purify a single square yard."

"Oh, no. Don't you dare. After all this, it damn well better work, whether it demeans my existence or not."

"That's enough chatting," interrupted Christine. "Our time pressure has not changed. Let's move to the courtyard and do some training."

"Workaholic," complained Wendy.

"You aren't one to talk, Miss Didn't-Notice-There-Was-a-War-On," countered Christine.

"Touché."

"Besides, I want to see how he managed to overcome four royal knights while in a state of such extreme mana deprivation."

Uh... Was it my imagination, or did Christine suddenly look *hungry*?

"That went better than expected," commented Queen Janna once Thomas had left the throne room. "Stephanie's plan was a complete success."

"A success?!" exclaimed Stephanie. "You call that a *success*?! No way! Please, you have to get me out of it! I don't want to be turned into a mindless puppet! *Anything* would be better than that!"

"Oh? What happened to going out with your head held high?"

"I'd have *preferred* that! At least it would be over quickly. I wouldn't have to worry about whatever small part of me was left watching what I'd become and being *happy* about it. Father, you were about to ask him to reconsider! Why did you stop?!"

"Because you told me to?" he answered uncertainly.

"Of course I did! I had to, to keep up appearances! That doesn't mean I wanted you to listen!"

"That's enough," declared the queen. "Your father was fully prepared to take responsibility. *You* were the one who came to *us*. You quite rightfully pointed out that it would be far less disruptive to the kingdom if you took the blame, and you were more likely to be able to calm Thomas down in a way that would leave him willing to work for us. You weren't correct about his reaction, but that was a

risk you knowingly took. You can't back out now. You will leave the castle tomorrow. I suggest you take the rest of the day to say farewell to your siblings and servants."

The distraught princess stared at her mother in shock before turning to her father with just a hint of hope in her despairing eyes.

"Perhaps we can delay things until it's proven that Thomas can purify corrupted land?" he suggested.

"We'll discuss it," stated the queen, making it clear the princess was dismissed.

"I *told* you it was too risky! This is all because you didn't listen to me!" she yelled before storming off in tears.

"That was too harsh. There must be something we can do?" said the king once the princess had left the chamber.

"You're overreacting," sighed the queen. "In the worst case, we need only keep it up until Thomas returns home, but I doubt her 'punishment' will last even that long. Weren't you paying attention to Mary in that audience?"

"Of course. I didn't miss her outburst when she thought Thomas was about to slit Stephanie's throat. She's still under orders to treat him as a submaster, so in theory, that shouldn't have happened. It's clear her conditioning has at least partially been undone. But what does that have to do with anything? It's not as if Thomas will be casting that spell on Stephanie."

"Yes, he *will*. He obviously still doesn't know what those collars do, and he didn't know Mary before her enslavement, so he has no idea how much they change people. Once he finds out, once he sees what he's done to Stephanie—especially if she tries to resist, or we order her acclimatization to be deliberately rushed—I suspect he'll find himself unable to bear the guilt. I imagine he'll question her—and she'll happily spill her guts to him of all that she knows—then, with such a convenient method of reversing her conditioning at his fingertips, he'll 'cure' her. It's in our interests to have Stephanie turn back up in front of Thomas as soon as possible as a perfect, compliant doll. Think of it as nothing more than her taking a short vacation, and as a means of feeding Thomas a controlled amount of information in a way he won't suspect."

"I see... Doubtless he's still suspicious he's been lied to about the cause of the war and other such details. Hearing what he's already been told from an enslaved Stephanie should assuage his concerns. It's fortunate we never told her the truth, then, and I imagine that's why you didn't offer her any reassurance that her 'punishment' would be temporary."

"Indeed; it wouldn't look good if she told him she started her slave training *expecting* to be freed. She was right about one thing, though; that hero is too damn perceptive. We can't risk another false flag operation."

"No. No, we cannot," replied the king. "And yet, despite the hopes of our daughter, it's far too premature to assume this new spell can be used to reclaim land. Is there really no way to get him to fight?"

He stroked his chin thoughtfully as, inside his mind, gears spun relentlessly.

Chapter 21: Good Intentions

Christine *didn't* blur, despite launching herself forward at a speed that would have left a drag racer in the dust. With the amount of mana I was pouring into my body strengthening, I could see every twitch she made. Thanks to the lessons I'd already had, I could read those movements. When she swung her wooden sword, I knew exactly what to do to parry it.

Alas, despite having no issues with perception, skill, or speed, things didn't go quite to plan.

"Err," I said as I picked splinters of wood out of my face, time speeding up around me as my heightened perception faded. "Were the swords supposed to do that?"

Christine looked down at the splintered stump she was holding in her hand, both of our swords having exploded in the impact. "In retrospect, perhaps attempting to use wooden training weapons for this test was a mistake."

"You're excited," goaded Wendy. "Our ice-cool genius knight is actually *excited* about finding an opponent she can have a proper fight with."

Christine glared, but she didn't deny it.

"Wow," said Mary. "I didn't see *anything*. There was just a blur, then a boom, and their swords were all smashed to bits!"

"Mary, could you please fetch us some metal training weapons?" asked Christine.

"Yup! Be right back," said Mary, running off.

"While she's gone, would you please explain exactly what that collar does?" I asked.

"You could ask even if she was here. She wouldn't care," Wendy replied with a shrug. "Or at least, she wouldn't have cared if you'd asked yesterday. I'm not quite sure what you've done to her, but she still seems happy, so hopefully it doesn't matter."

"Here or not, I'd still like an explanation."

"Very well. We have an aphorism here. I have no idea how it will be translated into your language, but in ours, it runs 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'"

"Wow. That translated pretty damn well, actually, assuming you mean people doing bad things for what they think are good reasons."

"Yes, and the modern slave collar is a shining example. Princess Stephanie wasn't lying when she said magic that denied someone free will was banned. It has been for centuries, and there's only one punishment for anyone caught using it, even on a slave: execution. There are few lines that all four races agree must not be crossed, but that is one of them, and they are all restrictions that are taken very seriously. They're lines that, if crossed by one race, would leave the others with little choice but to cross them to compete, and no one wants to live in that world."

So, they considered mind-control magic a sort of nuclear option. I'd need to ask later what the other lines were, but one difficult topic at a time was enough.

"As such, in the past, slave collars were purely for identification," Wendy continued. "They weren't enchanted at all. After all, who would waste expensive enchantments on mere slaves?"

"No one?" I guessed.

"Wrong! Baron Gristoff."

Well, that was an unfair question. How was I supposed to know that?

"He considered himself something of a philanthropist, and he noted that for some reason, all his slaves were depressed, and it was affecting their work. Odd that, right? That someone considered by law to be personal property rather than a person should be unhappy with their life? Well, that baron decided to do something about it. Perhaps you'd think of that 'something' as treating them like people, giving them a salary, or the like. Alas, Baron Gristoff was not so open-minded. He simply had his slaves' collars enchanted with a basic mood enhancer."

"She's simplifying somewhat," pointed out Christine. "His

philanthropy was in his tendency to hire criminal slaves with less-than-whole-life sentences who would otherwise end up being used as disposable labor in miasma-tainted mines, or other such deadly work, and wouldn't survive to see the ends of their sentences. It wasn't as if he could free them ahead of time. Instead, he tried to rehabilitate them and teach them useful life skills before their sentences came to an end."

"I didn't say anything about freeing them," Wendy argued back. "I said he should have treated them like people. Anyway, that's beside the point. He enchanted the collars, everyone was happy, productivity shot up, and all was good."

"Yes, yes. Enough with the sarcasm," groaned Christine.

"That *wasn't* sarcasm. It really did work well, at first. Yes, there were problems when the first group of criminals finished their sentences and had their collars taken off them—they suffered nasty withdrawal, but that was much later, and by that point things had already moved on. You see, Baron Gristoff was hardly the only slave owner in the world. Others took notice of the increased productivity of his slaves, did the math, and worked out that the savings from the potential head count reduction outweighed the cost of the enchantments. Soon, everyone was doing it. Of course, it wasn't long until people started asking questions like where the inflection point was—where strengthening the enchantment would no longer pay for itself. In the name of experimentation, people produced collars with stronger and stronger enchantments, until the wearers were left practically catatonic. The things were ridiculously addictive, with a number of cases where victims murdered their masters to get their hands on one, after which they'd simply put it on, fall over in bliss, and die of thirst a couple of days later. There were also areas where productivity didn't improve, such as those mines I mentioned. In fact, it was the opposite; when the enslaved miners got a bit of magically delivered spirit back, many of them rebelled. A number of mines were destroyed."

Christine remained silent, not even attempting to offer any justification or alternative opinion for that part of the story. The outcome seemed obvious to me; magically improving the mood of

someone whose entire future consisted of literally being worked to death wasn't going to make them work harder. It was going to make them attempt to escape. Had the people of the time actually been surprised by that?

"Things got bad enough that the king of the time ended up intervening. He signed the Slave Treatment and Welfare Act, giving us our modern standards for accommodation, necessities, food, and so on. Of course, the kingdom needed to continue operating its mines, so big chunks of the new law explicitly didn't apply to criminal slaves. That left the door open to continued experimentation, and some very bright minds that should damn well have been working on land reclamation or farming efficiency instead decided to see if they could tweak the collar design to improve the productivity of the slave mines."

"Mines that produce the enchanting materials that are *required* for modern farming," Christine pointed out.

"Then they should've been working on ways to protect the miners from miasma. Or on methods of extracting the materials we need without exposing miners to it. Whatever. Anyway, these people decided that what was needed wasn't a blanket improvement to mood, but a reward-and-punishment system. They devised a system whereby the miners were rewarded with a magical buzz for each unit of ore they dug out."

"And so the miners immediately turned on each other, killing each other to try to claim each other's work as their own," I guessed.

"You got it in one. But that setback didn't stop them. It only caused them to rethink their design. And, after a few more false starts, they hit upon a promising solution not by rewarding or punishing someone, but by messing around with their desires. You get hungry, so you eat. You take pleasure in eating, and once you're full, you feel satisfied. They managed to hijack that whole system. A slave gets an order, so they fulfill it, not because they want to or need to, but because in their mind, fulfilling it is a basic necessity on the same level as eating. And the collar didn't even need to reward them, because their own brain did all the hard work. Just like you might seek out tasty food, or find it hard to resist the urge to snack,

they were driven to receive orders, finding satisfaction and fulfillment in completing them."

"How in the hells is that not mind control?!" I complained.

"Because they don't *have* to follow orders any more than you have to eat," said Christine. "And nothing physically stops them from simply taking the collars off."

"I kinda do need to eat," I pointed out.

"Well, yes. Bad example. It's not as if they'd die if they don't follow an order. They'd just feel progressively more 'hungry.'"

"That's utterly horrific," I complained.

"Oh, just you wait. I haven't got to the good part yet," spat Wendy. "Unsatisfied with their success, and wanting to push it further by avoiding the need to give their slaves constant streams of explicit orders, they made a version that caused the victim to consider their owner's happiness and desires the same as an order. The first batch immediately stopped eating because they knew how much the researchers resented the food costs. When ordered to eat, the conflict broke them. Some committed suicide, and the survivors were driven insane."

"You have a funny idea of the definition of the 'good part.' Also, I'm not really seeing the whole 'good intentions' thing here."

Wendy shrugged. "As Christine said, the ores from those mines were vital to the farming efforts. Improving their efficiency indirectly lets us squeeze a little more out of our farmland, and hence pushes the point at which our kingdom can't feed itself just a little farther into the future."

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," I sighed. It was the same logic that had resulted in them trying to kill Mary. Abusing a few criminals so that the general population didn't starve? Yes, I could see people justifying that to themselves. In another timeline, they could have simply introduced capital punishment for such crimes to lower the number of mouths that needed to be fed.

"Yup. Anyway, they didn't consider that version of the enchantment a failure. It wasn't that it was fundamentally broken; it was just that hitting someone with everything all at once left them in a state where they couldn't process it. Logically, the slaves should

have known that even if their owners resented the food bills, they acknowledged their necessity; but the sudden application of the enchantment flooded them with so many 'needs' that it destroyed their ability to act rationally. And so the concept of an acclimatization process was created. It's intended to slowly lower someone into that state while leaving their ability to reason intact. Can you imagine going through that? Slowly having your basic needs and wants overwritten? And the whole time, you'll know that at some point you'll be *happy* about it, because it's what the one holding your reins wants. And then you reach that point, and you simply stop caring. Not to mention that by that point, you can't easily reverse it; it takes an equally long deprogramming process to get people used to having desires of their own again. But of course, it's still not legally mind control, and the other races didn't object to what we were doing because the lengthy acclimatization process rendered it useless as a weapon."

"It wasn't that bad," said Mary, who had returned in time to hear the tail end of Wendy's tirade. She'd brought a pair of metal swords, which hardly seemed like training weapons; merely blunting the blades would make little difference with the force Christine and I had been using earlier. A sharp blade might actually be better; a clean cut seemed like it would be easier to heal than having an entire limb mangled. "More boring than anything, to start with. It felt weird later on, and that was a little scary, but everyone was very nice and it didn't hurt."

"And here we have exhibit A, a willing victim of the process," sighed Wendy.

"Careful," growled Christine, taking up one of the swords. "Everything I said to Thomas about belittling her sacrifice applies to you too."

"Why have you got such a bee in your bonnet about that, anyway?" asked Wendy. "But at least she *was* willing. The ones who don't resist their 'training' are marginally better off. They tend to end up with some of their personality intact. Wait till you see an unwilling one, or someone who 'fails' their acclimatization."

"You've missed a bit of the explanation," I pointed out as I took

the second sword. “You said experimentation was banned on anyone except criminal slaves. Mary is no criminal.”

“It is banned. This isn’t experimentation; it’s the finished product. Production in the slave mines shot into the stratosphere with its introduction. The slaves involved were happy and felt fulfilled with their short lives, and no one rebelled, went insane, or murdered their coworkers. Naturally, they wanted to spread such a resounding success around, so everyone started using it. Before long, the process became universal for all slaves in Ricousian. The general perception is that because they end up so happy and content, it’s a *good* thing for them. And so now you have a slave who will willingly starve herself to death if you ask her to, and would be *happy* about it, because she’s fulfilling her duty.”

“Uh... No, I wouldn’t,” said Mary. “Besides, Master would never give me such a stupid order.”

“Okay, you’re a bad example. I still have no idea what Thomas did to you, but at least you seem to have a mind of your own again. It’s a vast improvement, so make sure you cherish it.”

Mary cocked her head in a way that suggested she didn’t quite get what Wendy was talking about. It wasn’t a difficult concept, though, so I found it hard to believe she couldn’t conceptually grasp it. I was reasonably certain she hadn’t been completely deprogrammed, but at least it was a start. Perhaps I could heal her further later.

I was also feeling a little bad for Princess Stephanie, particularly since Christine had confirmed she’d been used as a scapegoat. But she’d definitely been a part of everything, and now I knew it could be reversed even without the aid of my magic, so I didn’t feel *that* bad.

“Can we drop the subject now?” Christine sighed. “We really need to get back to training.”

“Good idea,” I agreed, feeling quite depressed enough already for one afternoon. Perhaps the punishment I should have demanded of the king was a tweak to their legal definition of mind control...

Despite today, my goal hadn’t really changed. If I wanted to help people, I needed the power to do it. They’d summoned me to save

the kingdom, and so saving the kingdom was what I would do. Naturally, saving the people of the kingdom was a part of that, even people the kingdom didn’t consider people.

Chapter 22: Battle Aura

Echoes of clanging metal resounded throughout the courtyard as I exchanged blows with Christine at superhuman speeds. With my superior base stats and mana, I'd hoped to dominate our mock battle, but despite her youth, her experience was not something to be ignored so lightly. Able to predict my parries and the path they would leave her weapon, she placed herself perfectly for follow-up attacks. She was obviously thinking three or four moves ahead, correctly predicting my reactions to her reactions.

But two could play at that game.

I felt like I was riding a bicycle for the first time in a decade, like a long disused skill, never completely lost, being pulled back to the surface. The experience was strange, but exciting. If only quantum mechanics back in university had been so intuitive.

I ducked under her swing and swept with a leg. She backstepped with perfect timing, simply stepping over my sweep, but this was what I'd expected, and I'd already followed up with a thrust. She twisted to avoid it, but that sent her momentarily off-balance, so I turned my thrust into a swing. She parried, but it left her further off-balance. I let my sword bounce off hers, reversing the direction and pirouetting, attacking from her other side before she could recover. Staggering, and with her sword out of position, she had no way to escape.

She raised her arm, placing her gauntlet in the way of my swing. A decent option, given the situation, but armor had its limits. It could only absorb so much force, and we were both using body strengthening. I'd already crumpled the breastplate of a knight with my bare hands. There was no way she could simply block my swing; she'd more than likely suffer a broken arm. Thankfully, we had two healers available.

My sword impacted her wrist with all the effect of a moth flying

into a brick wall. Despite the booming impact, her arm didn't budge an inch, nor did her gauntlet receive a single scratch. The impulse of striking such an unmovable barrier was so unexpected that it knocked the sword out of my hand, sending streamers of burning cold up my arm.

"My win," declared Christine, holding the tip of her blade up against my throat.

"What was *that*?!" I complained.

"Oh, Master! Your fingers!" shouted Mary from the sidelines.

No wonder my arm felt so weird. Two of my fingers had obviously been dislocated when my sword had been ripped out of my grip, bent backward at an angle no healthy finger should experience.

"**Sanatio**," I chanted, causing them to snap back into position.

"I wish you'd rely on me for healing," grumbled Mary. "I need to learn Sanatio."

"That was battle aura," belatedly answered Christine. "An advanced technique, but a useful one. It's something you need to watch out for if you ever see an experienced melee combatant wearing light armor, like mine, or even no armor at all."

"Oh? I assumed you were only wearing that instead of heavier plate because of the whole harem thing."

Christine looked down at herself in confusion. "You think this outfit is sexy?"

"Well, you are wearing a lot of leather..." I pointed out.

"Skin ripped off an animal and soaked in urine? You consider *that* appealing?!"

"Um, not when you phrase it like that, no."

Wendy snorted from over on the sidelines.

"I don't think you should be laughing," I called over to the woman who was still going commando in a maid's dress. That was a getup straight out of porn!

"Your strange views on leather aside, let's get back to battle aura," said Christine. "Since you've obviously mastered body strengthening already, let's have you learn it next. I suggest you cast Magiae Visus and watch me."

I nodded, as my mana sight had worn off a while back. "**Maius**

Magiae Visus," I chanted.

Wendy whistled. "Not just Magiae Visus, but the strengthened version. How did you know the image?"

"Same way as I did for Miraculum," I answered.

"Oh. So in other words, you simply made it up and let your hero bullshit fill in the blanks."

Mary didn't snap back "Language" like usual, but instead looked over at Wendy with a sad expression and glistening, disappointed eyes.

"Uh... I'm sorry, I meant to say, your *heroic blessing* filled in the blanks."

"Wow. It was super effective," I muttered, impressed.

"What?" asked Christine, the divine translation apparently not having helped with that one. "No, never mind. Swing at me again."

I did so, and, expecting the block, I managed to not dislocate anything in the process. My mana sight showed Christine pulling in mana from the air, forming a shell over her gauntlet. When I struck it, my attack blasted away a chunk of the mana, but caused no physical damage.

"It's like a temporary enchantment?" I guessed. "Ablative mana armor?"

"Exactly," confirmed Christine. "As I'm sure you can imagine, it's a lot easier with a rigid material as a medium. More advanced practitioners can use it on slightly flexible leather, or even cloth. Personally, I can use it on leather, but it's stronger on steel, which is why I always wear these gauntlets and greaves. A true expert can use it on their skin, although such a person would need to be supremely confident, given what could happen if it went wrong."

"Why? What could happen?" I asked.

"Imagine casting Ignis Pila, except that instead of forming the fireball in front of you, you form it inside your body."

I imagined that, and decided I wouldn't be using battle aura on my skin anytime soon, or maybe ever.

"Naturally, being a hero, I expect you to have completely mastered battle aura on any material, including yourself, by the end of today's session," said Christine.

"Wha? What happened to playing it safe?!"

"I intended to teach you body strengthening today, but it turned out you already knew it," answered Christine. "To have managed that without anyone finding out about it, you must have been secretly practicing it at night. Now that you know of the existence of battle aura, I must ensure you master it completely here, while under supervision, lest you once again decide to risk your life by trying it in your bed."

"He'd need a helper to use it in bed for what it's usually used in bed for," giggled Wendy.

"Uh... Wendy? Please don't make that sort of comment while dressed like that, or I'll ask Mary to look disappointedly at you again."

Wendy looked down.

"Oh, I forgot I was wearing this. No wonder it's so breezy."

"What is it usually used in bed for?" asked Christine, sporting a look of genuine confusion.

"Oh, you poor, naive little knight," laughed Wendy.

"What is happening right now?" I sighed. "Since when does Wendy make sex jokes?"

"Since I could relax a bit! Do you have any idea how tiring it's been over the past couple of days, needing to walk on eggshells and watch everything I said in case I accidentally gave away something I wasn't supposed to? I'm glad you saw through it all."

"You did slip up about the bath," Christine pointed out.

"I was excited!"

Yes, so excited she'd rushed through the castle naked. The bath slipup was minor in comparison.

"Putting Wendy aside, shall we proceed?" asked Christine, taking a large coin out of a pocket.

"Your armor has *pockets*?"

She didn't grace my surprised outburst with a response, instead handing me the coin. "Balance this on the back of your hand, then reinforce it. Don't actually test it; just use your mana sight for now, while I go and find a metal bracer that will fit you."

Thank goodness she was still playing at least *slightly* safe; we

were starting with rigid materials.

Christine turned out to be correct too; I *did* pick it up quickly. So quickly that by the end of the training session, I was still able to count the number of limbs I'd had chopped off on the fingers of a single hand.

Fang Zorzomon stared at the missive on the table in front of him, almost as if he expected it to jump up and bite him.

"That bad, huh?" asked Claw Thazremath, shifting slightly to make the most of the morning sun that was shining into the tent. "After Fort Mertti fell, I was expecting us to sweep as far west as the coast with no significant further resistance. What happened?"

"I have no idea. It's an offer of *surrender*. Not unconditional, but they agree to our broad terms. They're offering an admission of guilt, the corpses of the humans involved handed over immediately, and the punitive land divided into packages, control to be gradually transferred over the next thirty seasons."

"Huh? So it's a realistic offer—but now? That makes no sense. If they were going to surrender, either they should have done so weeks ago, when it became obvious they couldn't win, or else they should do it after we've shifted our campaign south and culled enough of their population that they can withstand the loss of land without widespread starvation."

"Exactly. So you see my concern. There's something we're missing here."

"Maybe the hero kicked their king's arse and *made* him surrender?"

"We still haven't confirmed there *is* a hero," sighed Zorzomon. "If this is hero related, I suspect it's a way of buying time; the offer is serious enough that I'll need to present it before the other fangs, but asking for a delay on the land means there's a good chance we'll end up going through multiple rounds of counteroffers."

"Hah. Sometimes you give the distinct impression that you wish you'd never been promoted."

"Was it only an impression?" snorted Zorzomon. "I meant to broadcast my feelings far more clearly than that. Anyway, what have

we had recently from their capital? Tell me everything that's even a little out of the usual, however unrelated it may seem."

"There's definitely *something* going on in the castle. Our spies have overheard castle servants gossiping in taverns about how the entire west wing has been declared off-limits, and how all the doors into the area are guarded, but none of them know why. As much as I hate to admit it, they're good at keeping their secrets. Yesterday, they slipped up, though. There was a massively powerful spell cast in the castle, and it wasn't shielded at all; our spies felt it even on the outskirts. We assume it's related to the closed wing."

"The heck? A spell powerful enough to be detected from halfway across the city? Why was that not already reported to me?!"

"It was white magic, so we know it's not anything useful for attack or defense purposes. There was no discernible effect from it. Our spies are still trying to gather information on what happened, but there hasn't been time yet for the castle workers to meet outside and gossip. All we can say at the moment is that no one is running around in a panic."

"White magic? Oh... Surely not..."

"You have an idea?"

"Use those brain cells of yours for a moment, you fool. Why do you think they might suddenly be willing to give up land the day after they cast a white spell powerful enough to echo across their entire capital?"

Claw Thazremath spent a moment using his brain cells. "Err... In that case, there's another bit of information you might find interesting. A spy who's acting as a slayer reported that a mission was posted in the guild last night to escort a task force of court mages into the corrupted lands. It didn't go into any detail as to what the mages would be doing, but it did mention them being relatively defenseless; so the requirements were for a highly ranked team, despite not going deep into dangerous territory."

"A group of defenseless mages? Probably not a hero, then, but the timing is massively suspicious."

"Is it possible they ended up with a healing-oriented hero? Or maybe simply one who refuses to fight, but offered to help in other

ways?”

“Maybe. Either way, if it’s true that the humans have developed a method to reclaim corrupted land, we certainly won’t be accepting that surrender—confiscating their farmland would cease to serve its purpose as a punishment. Make sure our spy joins that mission. We need to confirm our suspicions, and besides, a hero with negligible combat ability could prove an opportunity.”

“You want to assassinate or kidnap them?”

“Assassinate, no. If they’ve figured out a way to purify corrupted land, we must do nothing that could possibly result in the knowledge being lost, even if that requires leaving it in human hands. Kidnap...? Perhaps. But not yet; we have nowhere near enough information. Wait and see what information our spies can gather, but have a team deployed and ready to act. If an opportunity arises during that mission, we must be ready to seize it.”

Chapter 23: Black Fire

"Grysuurm. Sca xrouukn li."

My eyes snapped open as I flipped from unconsciousness to wide awake. Or, at least, I *felt* awake. Given the recognizable voice, ashen ground, and impenetrable dark fog, I suspected my body was still sleeping, whatever my mind was up to.

Thankfully, this time I came armed.

"**Maius Magiae Visus**," I chanted, and it *worked*.

The dark fog burst into color: a background of blue, with purple tendrils sprouting from the ground and knotting together as if they were trying to strangle the air itself. It was easily recognizable as the same stuff as the remains of the devil-fire, but *far* denser, and spread uniformly as far as my mana sight could see.

"Nuvaarz ka xi enthurm!"

Uh. Was it my imagination, or did that voice sound *angry*?

Like during my last visit, the dragon roared, blasting away the fog. The force almost blasted away *me*. I instinctively drew upon the local mana, employing body strengthening merely to remain upright, as I stared at the monstrous creature in the distance. It dropped from its hind legs to all fours, the impact of its forelegs heavy enough that it was felt as a tremor rather than heard.

"Klazzacorl," spoke the dragon, but I wasn't paying attention because one half of my body was burning.

I'd drawn on the mana, and a small amount of miasma had been pulled in with it.

With what little attention I could manage, I witnessed the dragon open its mouth, wisps of black flame curling up from the edges as it inhaled. Forced to my knees by the pain of the miasma poisoning, I couldn't even move.

Could I die here? Where *was* "here"? With no way to answer such questions, there was no choice but to assume the worst.

"**Maius Scutum**, **Maius Scutum**, **Maius Scutum**!" I shouted, producing shields over and over until a dozen of them stood between the dragon and my immobile form.

Black flame lanced from the dragon. It hit the first shield and split into two, rolling past me on either side so closely that I could feel the heat even above the burning miasma.

The first shield shattered. The second followed half a second later. Then the third and fourth.

"**Maius Scutum**, **Maius Scutum**!" I continued to shout, desperately trying to build defenses faster than they were shattering, but the race wasn't even close, and the flames drew ever closer. I called on my battle aura, trying to protect myself, but it did nothing to defend against the heat. My bare skin blistered before my eyes.

And then the final shield shattered.

"Master!" yelled a voice. "Master!"

It took a moment to work out that I was not, in fact, dead, but was sitting upright in my bed, and the voice belonged to Mary. Sunlight was visible through the arrow slits, but it was dim. Still early morning?

"Good morning?" I tried.

"Master!" repeated Mary, her head snapping upward, revealing her damp eyes. "Thank goodness! You're awake!"

She leaped forward and wrapped me in a relieved hug.

"Uh..." I said, experiencing a few more seconds of uncertainty before hugging back. Whoever was on night-guard duty was in the room too. Between them both being here, Mary's reaction, and the way I was sitting upright, I guessed they'd been trying to wake me for a while. "What happened?"

"You wouldn't wake up!" answered Mary, confirming my guess. "I came in to get your room ready, and you were squirming in your bed, and then you screamed, but you wouldn't wake up!"

"She was shaking you, and you didn't react at all," affirmed the guard. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I had the same nightmare as my first night," I replied. Christine had said she was going to look into it. I needed to check with her if

she'd found anything. "I feel fine now."

I really did too. In the dream—if dream it was—I'd suffered miasma poisoning and massive burns, but now there was no sign of them. Likewise, I'd cast mana sight, and from my perspective it had only been a few minutes earlier, far within the spell's duration, yet the spell wasn't active. As real as it had felt at the time, now that I'd woken up, the whole experience seemed dreamlike and surreal. The memory was already failing, just like last time, and even this soon after waking, I doubted I could repeat the words of the dragon.

But if it had been a mere dream, why hadn't Mary been able to wake me? A quick check revealed that I hadn't bled at all this time, but being stuck in a coma was no better.

"Are you sure?" questioned Mary, pulling back and giving me a careful inspection.

The move put her in position for me to inspect her too.

"Your collar!" I exclaimed.

Her hands instinctively went to her neck, where they grasped for a ring of metal that was no longer there. "Ma— I mean, Minister Dennis stopped by last night, after you'd turned in. He, umm, made some good points, and now I'm a proper, free employee of the castle. Is that okay? I still want to serve you."

It wasn't just the missing collar; she was wearing the same uniform as the maids she'd spotted yesterday. It was still the same black and white as her old ones, and it still favored practicality without much in the way of frills or ornamentation, but the material was much finer, and the hems were skillfully decorated with embroidery.

If they'd sorted her clothing out so quickly, hopefully that meant I'd get something less scratchy too.

"Yes, of course that's okay; I'm happy for you! But what sort of good points?"

"He asked if I wanted to make you happy, and then pointed out that me being freed from slavery would make you happy."

True enough, but also obvious. Did he need to jump through some hoops to convince her to keep her collar off?

"And also, if I was free, then I was free to call you whatever I

wanted, so I could still call you ‘master,’” she added, slightly bashfully.

“No comment,” I sighed, admitting I’d already lost that battle. Instead, I peered over at my chair, where my usual pile of laundry was missing. “Where are my clothes?”

“Wendy said she’d bring your new outfit over. It’s still a bit early, so she hasn’t arrived yet. Would you like some breakfast?”

“Why Wendy?” I asked, confused as to why she’d be the one bringing clothing. “But yes, I’d be thankful for some breakfast.”

The guard excused himself, and Mary served me breakfast in bed while we waited for Wendy to turn up.

She soon did, holding a thick bundle of white cloth. “Good morning!” she declared, barging into the room without even knocking. “As requested, I picked these up from the tower on the way over.”

She unfurled the bundle, revealing a white garment long enough to stretch from my shoulders to my ankles.

“That’s a dress,” I pointed out.

“No, it’s a robe,” denied Mary.

“What’s the difference?”

“Mostly that it’s being worn by a man who doesn’t want to admit he’s wearing a dress,” claimed Wendy.

“There are lots of differences!” corrected Mary, pulling up an extra flap of cloth from its back. “Look, it has a hood, it’s a thick material so you don’t need a cloak over the top, it’s a loose fit, and you put it on over your head rather than stepping into it.”

“Okay, so terminology aside, why do you want me to wear a robe?”

“It’s the official uniform for a male mage working in the castle,” explained Wendy, which seemed plausible; the four mages I’d seen upstairs yesterday had been wearing something very similar, except in different colors. Maybe they matched their affinities? Then why did Wendy always wear blue? “Given the conflicting goals of taking you off your leash while still preventing information about you from spreading, a disguise is a sensible precaution. The plate armor of a knight was another option. It would hide your face, but it would take

some time to learn how to move around in, is time consuming to get on and off, and would prevent the people who do know you from easily recognizing you. Not to mention that with how quickly you picked up battle aura, it wouldn't actually offer much extra in terms of protection."

"Fair enough," I conceded, not seeing any flaws in her logic. I let Mary help me get the robe on, along with a pair of breeches that went with it.

"It looks good on you!" she declared.

"Thanks," I responded, feeling a little like I was cosplaying, even if I was lacking the customary fantasy staff. I'd never seen anyone with a staff or wand, though, so maybe they didn't exist here. Also, did it still count as cosplay when I could really do magic? "Feels nice against my skin too. Far less scratchy than those other things you gave me. It seems a little impractical, though. How do I use the toilet?"

"Just hoick it up." Mary shrugged. "It's not hard. What do you think we girls do?"

I paused a moment. "To be honest, what girls do in the bathroom is not something I've ever thought about in that much detail."

"I'm starting to get the impression that you don't think about girls at all," giggled Wendy. "Minister Dennis tried to bribe you with a harem, and even somehow talked the king into including one of his daughters in it, and you just, heh, *ignored* it. You really know how to make a gal feel inadequate."

"Minister Dennis?" I questioned, ignoring the fluff about harems and focusing on that interesting snippet.

Wendy froze.

"Ah... You didn't know the whole hero summoning thing was originally his idea?" she probed.

"No. No, I did not. But by all means, please continue."

"Before you go off on a rampage again, he was, to the best of my knowledge, not involved in the fake assassination plot. He suggested things like the appearance of poverty, the fake smoke, and to encourage you to invent soy sauce."

"Fake smoke?"

"Ah, uh... Maybe I should stop talking..."

"Out of the window during my summoning," I realized. "Of course. From the maps Stephanie showed me, there's no way the front lines would be visible from here, so you made your own. I can't believe I didn't question that the moment she showed me the map."

Wendy took her own advice and refrained from speaking.

"I don't suppose it changes anything, though," I sighed. "I still would have stayed, because I didn't trust you to send me home."

"You didn't? Why not?" asked Wendy. "I'd have had you back home like a shot, if you had asked. Actually, that reminds me; you were supposed to write a letter for me to send back in case of death."

"Maybe you would've sent me back, but I'd just been yanked off another planet and had no idea who you were. For all I knew, you'd just kill me and summon someone else if I turned out not to be useful, to save on mana."

"That's what mana potions are for." She shrugged.

"I didn't even know they existed at the time. And as for the letter, I figured there wasn't much point while I was still here and trying to figure out what was going on. I planned to do it before leaving the castle."

"Eh. Just let me know when you've written one," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "It's not something we need to make a big deal about. Anyway, now that you're dressed, shall we get to the courtyard to learn some new spells?"

"I thought we needed a wide-open space for the next lesson?"

"That would have been true if I were teaching you anti-army tactical magic, but priorities have shifted somewhat. Today we'll be learning some stuff I know you've been looking forward to: information-gathering spells and subvocal casting."

Oh, awesome! Stuff I really wanted to know! Of course, the original reason I'd wanted to know them no longer applied, but doubtless there would be more things I needed to check up on myself as time went on.

"Do you regret it?" she asked as we walked.

"Pardon?"

"Not asking us to send you home. Knowing what you now know, and assuming you did trust me to get you back to the proper time and place, do you wish you'd gone home?"

"What I now know still isn't all that much," I admitted. "You realize I've still not seen a single demon? Not even a drawing of one. I've not seen a single shred of evidence that demons even exist, let alone that you're at war with them. But if I assume that everything I've been told is the truth, then no, I do not regret it. I can help people here."

Neither Wendy nor Mary responded to that, leaving us to continue walking in silence for a minute.

"Out of curiosity, how in the hells did you expect me to invent soy sauce?" I asked to break the silence. "I know it involves fermenting some sort of bean, but nothing beyond that, and I imagine not many people do. Besides, if you already know what it is, why does it need inventing?"

"Don't ask me. I have no idea what soy sauce is. Dennis just said something about how heroes always think their local cuisine is better than ours and keep trying to recreate it."

"Local? Soy sauce isn't exactly local to me... You know, I think I'm starting to form a suspicion."

"Oh, seriously? *Another* one. What are you suspicious about this time?"

"Nothing bad. I'm just starting to suspect that most of your heroes have been Japanese."

Chapter 24: Scrying

"The trick to subvocal casting is actually pretty easy," explained Wendy, back in the courtyard. "To be honest, I'm surprised you haven't figured it out for yourself."

"Huh? Really?" I asked, holding out a closed fist, imagining the mana forming a ball of light and trying really, really hard to keep my mouth shut. The word "**Lux**" escaped anyway, forcing its way up my throat and between my clenched teeth, echoing around the courtyard.

Wendy giggled, then held up her own hand, opening it in complete silence to reveal a ball of light. "Did you see what I did?" she asked.

"You didn't do anything..."

"Hah. It's nice to find something that your bull—uh, divine blessing doesn't let you cheat at," she said, flashing a nervous look at Mary at the midpoint of the sentence. Mary smiled back and gave her a thumbs-up. "I did do something. Watch again."

I peered, wondering what I'd missed. She took a deep breath in and out, held up her hand, and then there was light. There was nothing special.

Oh...

"Is it really that easy?" I asked, before expelling as much air as I could from my lungs and holding up my hand.

The spell's name *tried* to speak itself. I felt myself mouthing it, my lungs attempting to expel air that wasn't there. The result was like the more painful kind of hiccup.

"Ow."

Wendy giggled again. "Well done, you got it. You'll never hold your mouth closed, but keep it slightly open and try to speak without moving your lips. The lack of air will keep it silent, and the ventriloquism will stop lip-readers."

"It's not great if you need to cast while running, or are otherwise exerting yourself," I pointed out. "Or have no skill at ventriloquism."

"No, but there are trade-offs for everything. If a sword was strictly superior to a spear, why would we have spears? Or if a spear was superior to a sword, why swords? There is a time and a place for subvocal casting, but there are equally times when it is not appropriate. Now, shall we work on your scrying? **Prospectus**."

The air in front of Wendy shimmered and twisted, then a window opened up through which I could see my own back.

"Oh, that's pretty cool," I commented, turning around. There was nothing whatsoever behind me, though. "**Maius Magiae Visus**?" I tried. "Ah, now I see it."

There was a shimmering disk of mana hanging in the air, the same size as Wendy's window. Waving my hand through it had no effect. Neither did walking through it, although without me between the camera and the screen, the window in front of Wendy now showed the window in front of Wendy, ad infinitum. The effect was somewhat like standing between a pair of mirrors.

"It's a spell for spying?"

"Kinda. I'd say reconnaissance rather than spying. As you've already noticed, mana sight makes it trivial to spot someone using it, which limits its usefulness if you're trying to be covert. It's also easy to ward against, although that works both ways. No one's invented a one-way ward yet, so the reason I'm showing another point in the courtyard is because I can't project it through the castle walls. It's still useful, though. In the corrupted lands, for example, it's great for scouting ahead. Many monsters have natural mana sight, but even if they can detect your spell, most aren't intelligent enough to trace it back to the caster or understand what it means. Anyway, you give it a go."

"Not even going to give me a hint about the image?"

"Nope," she replied, grinning evilly. "I want to see what you can do."

Wishing I'd had mana sight active when she cast it, I did the best I could. How hard could it be? It was just two connected disks of mana, one the sender and the other the receiver. Being a physics

student, I was well aware of the technical difficulties involved, like the way the sending side couldn't simply absorb light or it wouldn't appear transparent, or that the angles of incidence of the photons needed to be transmitted along with their wavelength. Thankfully, magic didn't care about physics.

"**Prospectus**."

Yup. Easy.

"There's a word for what you just did, but Mary will glare at me if I say it," whined Wendy, obviously disappointed that I'd succeeded.

"I'll glare at you anyway. You're being mean to Master," shouted Mary, who was indeed glaring.

I ignored them, choosing instead to peer into my little disk of elsewhere. I didn't see very much. I'd aimed the other end high up in the air, hoping to see over the walls, but all I was getting was black.

"Perhaps you're complaining prematurely," I called to Wendy. "I don't think it worked."

She peered over to check. "Weren't you listening earlier? The walls are warded."

"But both ends of my spell are inside them."

"You still can't use the spell to look outside. You just see a black wall where the ward is."

"How does that make any sense whatsoever?" I complained. If I'd known that yesterday, Christine's claim that the demons had accurately targeted the tiny arrow slit from the other side of the wall would have been obvious nonsense.

"That's just the way it works," she replied with a shrug.

"You know, I'm starting to suspect you lot don't actually know very much about magic."

"Well, no. It's *magic*. It does what it likes."

"Speaking of, why are spells so insistent on being spoken out loud, when things like body strengthening and battle aura involve manipulating mana but don't need to be named?"

"Oh, they *are* spells, by a textbook definition. Like I said, magic does what it likes, and all colors of magic have their unique characteristics. Gray spells don't have names, and the difficulty

scales with distance far more sharply than other colors. It's why you can use battle aura to strengthen your armor, but not your sword. Unless you particularly want to harden the hilt, I guess."

"Gray, huh?" I asked. "I really wish you'd summoned me years ago and let me work my way through that academy you mentioned."

"Oh? A mere two sentences ago, were you not claiming we didn't know very much about magic?"

"Uh... Well, maybe I was a *little* harsh."

"Ha. I'd be the first to admit there are still many mysteries surrounding mana. I'd be out of a job if there weren't! Besides, you probably wouldn't need the full fourteen seasons; I bet you could clear all the practical classes in the first couple of weeks. Anyway, shall we continue? **Exploratio**."

I waited, but nothing seemed to happen, despite the obvious spell-cast.

"Can't see it, huh?" asked Wendy, grinning victoriously. "You should be able to with Maius Magiae Visus, but if you aren't watching for it, it's still easy to miss."

"No, I didn't see anything," I admitted.

"Like I said earlier, everything has its strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of Prospectus are that it can be shared—anyone can look through the window that you open—and that the sending side has a vast range. The weaknesses are that the receiving side is pretty obvious to anything with eyes, and that even the sending side is obvious to anything with mana sight. Exploratio is the opposite. Shorter range, and the window it opens is layered over the caster's eye, invisible to anyone else. The sending side can't be seen at all with Magiae Visus, and even with Maius Magiae Visus, it's likely to pass without notice unless someone is actively looking for it. Exploratio is a spell for covert spying. It does, however, share the weakness that it's trivial to ward against."

I looked around while Wendy was explaining, eventually spotting an out-of-place pinprick of mana floating in the air above us. She was right; had I not been looking for something out of place, it was very unlikely I'd have spotted it.

"**Exploratio**," I chanted, giving the spell a go for myself. It

resulted in a view of the other side of the courtyard plastered across one of my eyes, giving me headache-inducing double vision. Another advantage of Prospectus: less chance of making the caster sick.

"Excellent," she declared. "Frustrating, bordering on embarrassing, but still excellent. Now, let's clear a few spells that need less explanation. **Vitae Visus**, **Caloris Visus**, **Animae Visus**."

She stopped and waited expectantly.

"You're going to need to tell me *something*," I complained. "I can guess they're all related to Magiae Visus, but there's no way I can cast them without knowing what they're supposed to let me see."

"Oh? Are you *sure*? Not even going to try? You might surprise yourself."

"You're *researching* me, aren't you?" I accused. "You didn't quit your job to train me. You just changed its focus."

"I'm admitting nothing," she stated, despite wearing an evil grin that admitted everything.

"Well, I suppose the higher-ups must have offered you *something* you considered sufficiently valuable to not mind joining a harem," I sighed while wondering what other types of "sight" there could be. There were plenty of options, starting with the scientifically plausible, like regions of the electromagnetic spectrum outside of the usual visual range, moving on to RPG staples like life or alignment, then more nebulous ideas like value, hope, or opportunity. I could work my way through each spell, trying each idea in turn, and hope I hit on the correct combinations, but it would be far more efficient if she just told me.

"Huh? Why would they need to offer me anything to get involved in a fivesome involving a hero and a princess? Not to mention the humor value of watching Christine be incredibly awkward about the whole thing."

Okaaaay, so Wendy was firmly in the "willing participant" camp. Duly noted.

But back on topic, maybe I could just use all the images at once, invoke the spells in turn, and use what I could see to deduce which one was which? I pictured a thin film of mana coating my eyes,

letting me see anything and everything there was to see, then started to speak.

My tongue twisted, the words warping in my throat even as I tried to voice them.

"**Omnium Visus**!"

The words bounced around the courtyard, continuing to echo for long after they should have died away. It wasn't anywhere near as forceful as Miraculum, but it was still obviously abnormal compared to regular spells. Each syllable struck reality like a hammer. Small whirlpools of dust were kicked up from the ground, and loose chips of stone fell from the walls.

"Huh. That was unexpected," commented Wendy.

Meanwhile, I slammed my eyes shut, my vision flooded with far more overlaid images than I had any hope of coping with. Mere eyelids didn't help as much as I'd hoped, so I added an arm to my blindfold. Even with that, my vision was simultaneously glowing red, red, and silver. How I could simultaneously be seeing the same color twice was a contradiction I didn't have the mental capacity to deal with.

"Something else we've neglected to cover so far!" I shouted. "How do you turn spells *off*?!"

"Litura," answered Wendy.

"**Litura**!" I repeated, not putting too much effort into an image beyond *making it all stop*.

Thankfully, it stopped.

I gingerly removed my arm and opened my eyes again, blinking a few times in the sunlight. "Well, that was interesting," I commented dryly.

"Too damn right!" whooped Wendy. "Not only can you spell-cast without needing to worry about the detail or accuracy of your images, but you can even cast a spell without knowing its name! Congratulations on casting your first major-tier spell, by the way, although I suppose Miraculum takes some of the luster off the achievement. That one must have been ultimate tier. How's your mana?"

"Spells have tiers?" I asked. "And my mana is fine, surprisingly."

It really was too. I didn't feel strained in the slightest.

"Hmm... If your capacity has increased again since yesterday, I wonder how many times you could cast Miraculum now without exhausting yourself. Oh, and remember Litura; the range is short, but it can be used on other people's magic too. It won't do anything to erase offensive spell effects, but if you ever find yourself needing to rob someone of their mana sight, that's the tool for you."

"Just how many spells do you know?" I asked, feeling like I was drowning under all the names I needed to remember. "How do you keep them all straight?"

"How many words do you know of whatever language you speak, and how do you keep *them* all straight?" she countered.

"Language is something I use a *lot*, though."

"And that right there is your answer," replied Wendy, grinning as if she'd just imparted a pearl of great wisdom. "Speaking of which, let's go through those vision spells one by one until you get sufficiently used to them to make use of Omnium Visus."

"Oh, fun. Mary? Perhaps you should get a sick bucket ready."

"Already did, Master!" she called from the sidelines, gesturing at a bucket.

Really? I, the supposed hero, had acquired a reputation for throwing up so often that a bucket was now a permanent feature of the courtyard?

Chapter 25: Fang

"Remember that dragon nightmare I had my first night?" I asked Christine once our full group was gathered back in the courtyard after lunch.

Well, full except for Stephanie, whom I hadn't seen since I'd stormed into the throne room. I had no way of confirming where she actually was—she could easily be hiding somewhere in the castle—but I had no intention of asking.

"I do. No one else heard or saw anything, nor have there been any reports of similar dreams or signs of a dragon reemergence. The most likely explanation is simply that you had a nightmare, presumably precipitated by your summoning. It wouldn't be surprising."

"And the blood?"

"Your foolish experimentation with body strengthening."

"I'm *almost* certain I was bleeding before I started that! And in any case, it happened again."

"Again?" asked Christine, frowning.

"I had a similar nightmare. Apparently, Mary was trying for some time to wake me, with no effect."

"It's true!" agreed Mary. "I was shaking him, and his guard was shouting, and then I cast Parvus Sanatio, but nothing helped."

Christine's frown deepened. "That is...concerning."

"Too damn right," agreed Wendy. "Dammit, someone should have fetched me; I could have checked for any active magic. How long was he unresponsive?"

"Uh... About five minutes?" answered Mary.

"And what did you dream of?"

"Like before, I was standing in a flat field of ash, with a thick, dark fog blanketing the place. This time, I cast Maius Magiae Visus, which showed me mana and dense miasma. The dragon said

something I didn't understand, then roared, blasting the fog away. Then it hit me with fire breath, except it was black. I made about twenty casts of Maius Scutum, but it blasted straight through them all. Then, just when I thought I was dead, I woke up."

"Weird..." opined Wendy.

"You can't remember what it said?" asked Christine.

"No. The moment I woke up, the details started blurring, and all I could remember was that I couldn't understand it even in the dream. It was terrifying at the time, but within a minute of waking, it faded to the point where it felt like a normal bad dream."

"If not for the inability to wake him, and the blood from the first time around, I'd say it was nothing more than a nightmare," said Christine.

"It's a bit of an odd thing to have a nightmare about, though," Wendy pointed out. "Yes, we mentioned dragons, but only as part of our history. It's not as if he needs to fight one. If he's having nightmares, they should be about demons. Or, dare I say, Mary getting murdered."

Christine clicked her tongue, either at the situation or at Wendy's snide comment. "Let's consider this rationally by asking the most important questions. Is Thomas in danger, and is there anything we can do?"

"I'm pretty sure I got flamed last night, and I woke up unharmed. Nor was my mana sight still active, despite me having cast it only minutes earlier. I have no reason to believe the dream was real."

"That doesn't mean much. The nightmare could have been much earlier in the night, and your death there is what made it difficult for you to wake. And... Here's another disturbing thought. You used the words 'except it was black.' What color would you expect dragon breath to be? We never mentioned that detail."

"Red? Like normal flames?"

"All dragon fire is black," sighed Christine. "So your dream contained details you can't have known. That is indeed disturbing. But what about the second question? What can we do?"

The group fell into silence.

"Then I don't see any option but to continue as planned. We'll be

setting out for the nearest corrupted lands tomorrow morning. While we're out, I'll have some of our scholars look over the records and see if anything like this has happened before."

"Fair enough," I agreed. Until Wendy's point about me possibly getting flamed much earlier in the night and being left in a coma by it, I hadn't been too worried. Now I was *very* worried. If this happened again, perhaps I could slink away in the direction opposite the dragon...

"The group will consist of you, Wendy, and me, along with a small group of court mages and a few squads of Rank C slayers," continued Christine. "Sorry, but we'll not be bringing Mary with us."

"That's understandable; I can't defend myself," agreed Mary.

"What are slayers?" I asked, wondering about the unfamiliar term.

"Professional monster hunters," replied Christine. "The warriors who work to collect magical reagents from monsters, and to keep their population culled and prevent miasmic floods."

"Why slayers, though?" asked Wendy. "Why not knights or soldiers?"

"Several reasons. We don't want to take from the defenses of the castle or the capital, for a start. We are also trying to keep Thomas's true identity a secret, and army forces moving around would be sure to attract attention."

"A group of court mages will attract attention too, but I can see the logic," conceded Wendy. "We aren't going deep into the corrupted lands. It's only a few days' round trip, and we shouldn't encounter anything dangerous."

"Exactly. With Thomas's growth, the three of us should be able to handle any danger we're likely to run into on our own. Bringing an escort of slayers is purely out of an abundance of caution and to aid with logistics."

"Yeah, a watch rotation with only three people wouldn't be fun," agreed Wendy.

"I would have liked to have Thomas fight captive monsters in preparation, but arranging that secretly and at short notice hasn't proven possible. You'll be training against me again instead. First, I

want you to get used to using battle aura in your mage robes. If you master that quickly enough, I'll teach you crescent fang."

"You'll teach me what?" I asked, ears perking at the unfamiliar name.

"No, I'm not falling for that one. If I show you, you'll try to copy it unsupervised."

"I can't help but feel that I've gained several unearned reputations in the few days I've been here."

"Uh... You kinda *did* earn them..." admitted Mary, whom I hadn't even thrown up on once while getting the hang of Omnium Visus.

It was a shame Wendy had then spoiled things completely by suggesting I give Maius Omnium Visus a go.

"Wow. Et tu, Mary?" I asked, doing my best attempt at a pout. She had plenty of spare uniforms, after all.

"I'm not sure what your face is doing, but please make it stop," begged Wendy.

"Sorry," I said, suspecting my best wasn't great and that an apology was probably warranted. "But I suppose we should get started. If I'm expected to wear this dress—"

"Robe!" corrected Mary.

"—on our little expedition, practicing fighting in it seems sensible."

"Then take your weapon. We'll be using the blunted metal swords from the beginning today," said Christine.

"Do mages ever use staves or wands or other such things?" I asked as I drew my metal training sword, still unable to shake the feeling I was some sort of half-baked cosplayer. I had to try quite hard to resist the urge to flip up my hood. There was a fragment of geek buried deep inside me that really wanted to, but the part of me that respected common sense pointed out that restricting my range of vision in battle would be a damn stupid thing to do. "The sword-and-robe combo seems fundamentally wrong, somehow."

"Yes?" suggested Wendy, giving the impression she didn't quite understand the question. "Slayer mages often use staves, mainly so they can bash weaker monsters with them and save on mana, but if you're asking about foci, a staff or a wand isn't really any better than

a simple ring. They're certainly not worth giving up a hand to carry. It is possible to create staves and wands with embedded spells, but for you, there's no point; they're less efficient and harder to control than casting the spell yourself, so they're only useful for casting spells of an affinity you completely lack."

"And I have every affinity," I finished. "What's a foci?"

"A focus. Foci is the plural. They're items attuned to a specific affinity and that aid you with spells of that color, but make spells of other colors less efficient. So, again, not much point for you. Otherwise, I'd have given you one to start with."

"Fair enough," I admitted, wondering if I could still get a staff just for the look of the thing. Maybe a staff-shaped sheath for my sword? Or one with a detachable knob at the end that could be removed to reveal a spearhead?

"If you're done asking magic questions in your martial arts class, shall we begin?" asked Christine, not waiting for my response before beginning.

"I think I'm going to need a new robe," I admitted an hour later. Wendy hadn't been kidding about how battle aura scaled with distance, which made protecting the loose uniform tough, particularly the baggy sleeves and hem. Still, I'd gotten the hang of protecting the important bits before the last threads gave up and left me in my underwear.

"Those robes are expensive," complained Wendy. "Not that I'm paying for them, or that I care. I just feel obliged to point it out."

"Better he learn here than in the middle of a monster attack," said Christine.

"Yeah. Ending up naked in the middle of a large group of slayers and mages doesn't sound fun," I agreed.

"Yes, it does," disagreed Wendy. "Just not necessarily for you."

"Please rein it in, Wendy," sighed Christine. "You were doing a reasonable job of acting professional the first couple of days."

"Oh, come on. You don't think it would be funny? You agree with me, right, Mary?"

"Uh..." demurred Mary, who obviously agreed but didn't want to admit it.

"If you have slimes here, I'm totally going to sneak some into Wendy's bed," I muttered. Then, aloud, I demanded, "Look, have I qualified to learn crescent fang yet or not?"

"At least *someone* is capable of focus," said Christine, taking an odd stance with her sword raised and the palm of her off hand pressed against the blade. I prepared to defend, watching her feet to spot the moment of her advance, but they remained firmly planted in place.

She swung the blade, and despite being yards away from me, my sword arm went flying off behind me.



"What?" I asked stupidly, my nervous system not quite having caught up with the fact that my arm was no longer attached.

"And that was crescent fang," said Christine. "I have to say, I was expecting you to dodge or block it, rather than just stand there and take it."

"I didn't even *see* it!" I complained. There was a rut cut into the earth, starting a couple of yards in front of Christine and extending a few more yards behind me. It was as if her sword had momentarily extended itself during her swing. "Also, ouch," I added, as my brain finally got the message that I was supposed to be in pain.

I had thought yesterday, and was thinking again now, that a severed limb should probably result in more than an "ouch." It wasn't as if I'd made a habit of having limbs chopped off back on Earth, so I couldn't say for sure, but common sense insisted it should be painful. Either my common sense was wrong, or perhaps my divine blessing interfered with pain too?

"Here you go, Master," said Mary, who'd run out to collect and return my arm like some sort of ball girl. Or possibly a puppy playing fetch...

"Thanks. **Maius Sanatio**," I said, reattaching it and replenishing all the blood that was now fertilizing the courtyard instead of keeping my tissues oxygenated.

Another random thought that I kinda wished I hadn't had: What if dust got in the joint? Did I now have soil stuck in the middle of my bones? Should I have washed the cut before reattaching? Mary didn't say anything, and she was the one with training in healing, so hopefully it was fine. Just like the way I hoped it didn't matter if my positioning was a few millimeters off. I could still move it, so the nerves at least must have all been linked back together correctly.

"Let's try that again. This time, I'll aim at a target. Please use your mana sight to observe."

"Why didn't you use a target the first time?" I complained, before remembering her behavior yesterday. "Wait... Bah, and there I was thinking that you were more professional than Wendy."

"You can hardly blame her. It's not often a hero shows up. We all want to see how far you can go, so it's only natural she's getting a

bit excited," smirked Wendy.

"Please don't lump me together with her," sighed Christine. "And please cast your mana vision."

"I already have," I answered, smirking in turn. Rather, I had used Maius Omnium Visus, but had cast it subvocally. Given how loud the standard version of the powerful sight spell had been, I'd figured the enhanced version would be worse, and thus casting it out loud would run counter to the goal of keeping a low profile. We didn't want another Miraculum vibrating the castle.

It was an impressive spell. Even putting aside the various other overlays it offered, the mana sight alone exceeded Maius Magiae Visus in both range and detail. The range still wasn't huge, but I was at least able to see from one side of the courtyard to the other, meaning both Christine and the targets were in range.

She took the same stance again, and I could see her coating the blade with mana. She swung, launching the mana in a crescent-shaped wave that tore through the air with bullet-like speed. It expanded as it traveled, the base gouging into the ground. The portion that hit the black pillar did nothing, harmlessly dissipated by whatever the target was made of. The top part continued on, expanding farther and striking the far wall, but not causing any noticeable damage.

Perhaps "diffused" would be a better description than "expanded." It was a mana-based ranged attack usable by those with only melee weapons, but the range wasn't unlimited. Too far, and the fang spread out too much to pierce anything.

"Did you get it?" asked Christine.

"I think so," I answered, taking the same stance and coating my training weapon with mana in the same way. "Crescent fang!" shouted my overly excited inner geek as I swung my sword downward, launching the fang of mana through the air.

"Uh..." the more logical part of me added as I realized I'd used a *lot* more mana than Christine. The noise as it tore into the ground was substantial. Thankfully, it still didn't do anything to the black pillar.

Of course, like Christine's, the upper part of my attack kept going.

"I can think of another reputation you're well on the way to earning," laughed Wendy as the four of us stared at the large gouge I'd torn in the castle's outer wall.

"At least it didn't go all the way through?" I tried, but without much hope. This time, it was my logical side that flipped up my hood, trying to hide my embarrassment as a crowd of guards rushed into the courtyard. "Why don't they make the walls out of whatever those targets are made from?"

Chapter 26: Preparations

"Are you sure you don't want any help?" asked Mary from the other side of my privacy screen, where she'd been waiting patiently for quite some time.

"I am a grown adult, and I can get dressed by myself," I replied grumpily as I struggled, tangled up in a new bundle of white cloth that had turned up overnight.

"You didn't answer the question," pointed out Mary.

"Yes, I want help," I admitted. I'd already gotten everything on except for the robe, so at least I wasn't indecent. "Otherwise it'll be time to leave on our expedition before I've had a chance to eat breakfast."

Mary giggled as she crossed over to my side of the screen and helped me get my head through the correct hole and my arms into the correct tubes.

"I maintain that this thing isn't practical," I complained.

"Why not? You didn't struggle to use the bathroom yesterday."

"Yes, but I can't get it on!"

"Umm... This is the uniform for court mages, though?"

"So? Is there a spell for getting dressed?"

Mary tilted her head in confusion, but after a few seconds of thought, realization seemed to dawn. "Ah! I mean, a court mage is an important, rich person."

I remembered the way Mary had always *expected* to help me get dressed, whatever I was wearing, which went some way to filling in her sparse explanation. It wasn't just that she was eager to help, but that she considered it a perfectly normal thing to do. "So basically, not being able to get dressed on your own doesn't count as impractical for high-class clothing because anyone in a position to wear such things won't ever dress themselves."

"Yup! So you need to hurry up and get used to it already!"

The process shouldn't have been *that* hard. This wasn't much more than an extra-long hoodie, after all. It was a pity the previous day's outfit had been destroyed during training; I could have practiced getting it on and off overnight.

"Oh, that's not what we normally have for breakfast," I pointed out as I returned to the main part of my room, spying the plate on my desk that contained eggs and a small amount of something that looked very much like bacon. So they did have animals after all, the liars.

"There's no 'we,'" pouted Mary. "I still only get porridge. If I want anything else, I need to buy it myself."

I smiled at her complaint; they were still feeding her for free, as well as paying her a wage. At least she *had* the option of buying stuff for herself now, unlike when I first arrived and she had no belongings whatsoever.

And, if our outing was successful, hopefully the food situation would soon get a lot better.

"While we're alone, how are you?" I asked.

"Huh? I'm great!" she replied, the pout instantly switching to a beaming smile.

"I can see that, but it wasn't quite what I meant. I know you're aware of what was done to you while you were a slave. My Miraculum obviously did something to you, but sometimes you still act a bit...odd. Like when Wendy congratulated you on having a mind of your own, and you blanked out. You obviously do, but you seem loath to admit it."

"I... Uh..." stammered Mary, seemingly having no idea how to answer.

A quick subvocal cast of my go-to everything-sight spell showed no mana acting on her, or anything at all that looked unusual. Whatever was going on wasn't something my magic would let me see.

"Please, don't pick at scabs," she suddenly said in a tone quite unlike anything I'd ever heard from her. It was practically a *growl*. "I know what I want, and what I want is to be here!" she continued, her normal energy restored as if it had never left.

"What?" I asked, completely nonplussed, but that was apparently all I was getting. Alas, if she didn't want to talk about it, it wasn't as if I could force her. That would be a legendary level of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, I was still worried about her behavior, and that little episode did nothing to reassure me. Me saving her life could explain away a lot of the way she treated me. The previous night, she'd even tried to sleep in my room not out of any sort of continuation of their harem plan, but out of completely innocent concern that I'd have another bad dream. Helping me get dressed might be a perfectly normal duty for a maid, but I was pretty sure trying to hug my bad dreams away wasn't. But her odd behavior wasn't limited to how she treated me.

"Well, if you ever need anything, or have something you want to say, please don't hesitate to bring it to me," I said.

She nodded, but said nothing more, making her position perfectly clear. Wendy and Christine turned up soon afterward, already prepared for our journey.

"Here's a pack for you to carry," said Christine, handing me a backpack. "As you'll be pretending to be a court mage, it's not heavy. Just provisions and some magical tools for camping."

I nodded and took it, noting that the pack Christine had on her back did not at all look light. "You're not bringing a cart or carriage or something?" I asked.

"No. Unless we all rode horses, it would only reduce our speed and maneuverability. We'd add an extra day to our travel time and be less able to respond to unexpected situations."

"Unless the situation requires a few extra days of food," added Wendy.

"As you pointed out yesterday, there are advantages and disadvantages to everything," I said.

"True. I wouldn't have said no to a packhorse, though, even without a cart. Well, let's get going. We're meeting the other mages and our escorts at the castle gates, then you'll get your first up close look at the city."

"Bye!" Mary waved as we left, any trace of the earlier conversation gone from her face. "Come back safely!"

"We'll be acting as if Miraculum is ritual magic cast by all five mages working together," explained Wendy as we walked. "Real ritual magic involves a group of mages forming the same image and manipulating the mana together, then the ritual leader activates the spell. It allows the use of magic beyond the capacity of an individual, but it requires a ridiculous level of coordination, and things only get worse as you add more people. Thankfully, we needn't worry about that. We'll just hold hands, stand in a circle, then let you do your thing on your own."

"For the same reason, if monsters appear, leave them to the slayers to deal with," added Christine. "Dodge attacks in the first instance, and only resort to magic in an emergency or if dodging physically would stretch the bounds of believability for a mage."

"You're going to a lot of effort to disguise the fact you have a hero."

"Obviously," snorted Christine. "Do you have any idea what the demons would do if they discovered you?"

"No," I answered honestly. "You've hinted assassination, but I've still not seen any evidence."

Christine opened her mouth to reply, but then hesitated. "I'm not actually sure either, now," she admitted. "It depends what information they have. If they believe that you're working for us in a military capacity, they certainly wouldn't hesitate to assassinate, should an opportunity arise. On the other hand, if they have any suspicions you can purify corrupted land, even if you're working for us, your life is completely safe from them. Even the demons aren't stupid enough to destroy the greatest chance of land reclamation we've had in centuries. They might try information warfare, in the same vein as us, or they might attempt to kidnap you, although I'm not sure what they'd do once they got hold of you."

"Bleh. Now I need to worry about being kidnapped too and used as a hostage to force him to do stuff," complained Wendy.

"Frankly, I suspect the pair of us would make poor hostages. Thomas simply hasn't shown the same level of affection for us as he has for Mary. Being so valuable and yet a complete noncombatant, she is, by far, his biggest weakness."

"Hey!" I complained. "I mean, that's probably true, but even so..."

"Do not worry. Mary will be well protected here."

"Really? Here in your castle, surrounded by knights like you who are prepared to follow any order, no matter how heinous? What if it's your king who decides he needs some leverage over me?"

Great. Now I felt nervous about leaving her alone.

"I know I've said it before, but you really know how to make a gal feel inadequate," sighed Wendy. "So you don't care if I—a genius mage from a noble family—get taken hostage, but you do care about a commoner maid?"

"I'd care," I promised. "I'd just trust that you—a genius mage—would be perfectly capable of getting yourself out of trouble."

"Hah. Okay, that does make my ego feel a little better."

"I'll admit I don't give a toss about your nobility, though."

Wendy grinned. "Honestly, I wish more people wouldn't. Anyway, we're here."

We'd arrived at the large passageway in front of the throne room, but instead of turning into the throne room, we turned the opposite way, toward the castle exit.

There were three familiar faces waiting by the massive doors.

"Aren't we missing one?" I asked, looking at the three familiar mages in their robes of green, brown, and red.

The mages glared at me. "Don't assume everyone is like you, able to get off scot-free after attacking royal knights," said the red one. "You wearing that robe after what you did is an insult."

Huh? But it was the blue one that was missing, and hadn't it been the red one who'd sided with me? No, wait... Now that I looked at their faces, hadn't they swapped colors? I found it rather offensive that the one who'd sided with me was the only one punished, though. Although I supposed trying to cut a knight's leg off was going a little far. He could have just not got involved, like the two who jumped out the window.

"Cut that out," demanded Christine. "I expect professionalism on this mission. Now, I believe some introductions are in order."

"Fine. Benjamin Freeman," said the new red one.

"Taylor Roberson," said the green one.

"Juan Coke," finished the brown one, making me wince. That was a name I was going to need to be very careful not to mispronounce.

"Thomas Smith," I added. Wendy and Christine didn't join in, presumably because everyone knew them already. "By the way, do the robe colors mean anything?"

"Theoretically, the primary affinity of the wearer," replied Wendy.

"But they've changed... And even if you're not wearing one of these robes, you're blue instead of green."

"Yes, because we aren't goddamn idiots," said Benjamin. "In the middle of a war, why would we go out advertising what spells we're likely to cast?"

"Oh, really?" asked Wendy. "I just don't like green. It really doesn't look good on me."

"Damn right," muttered Taylor. "I look like I've let my robe go moldy."

"Please stay on track," sighed Christine. "My job here is to protect you, not to babysit. Let's meet our hired escorts."

"Why in the hells are we hiring slayers?" muttered Juan. "The castle could easily have spared a few knights. Heck, just bring the guards who were watching the entrances of the west wing. It's not like there's anything in there now."

"We don't want a detachment of knights to be seen leaving the castle."

"Then disguise them! Give them leather armor."

"We've already had this debate. The matter is closed, and our escorts are waiting outside," declared Christine with an air of finality, walking up to the massive doors.

They didn't move. Rather, a much smaller door popped open.

"Huh. The door has a door in it," I commented, probably finding that fact more amusing than was warranted. It wasn't as if cat flaps were uncommon back on Earth.

Outside the door-in-a-door was a pack of eleven slayers, split into three groups. They were all so *stereotypical* I found myself frozen in shock. Just from a glance, I could guess the role of every one of them. There were a few mages in robes similar to mine—except with clasps at the front that made it obvious they could be put on

unaided—two holding robust-looking staves. A couple of healers in white vestments. A bulky barbarian with rippling muscles, a two-handed sword strapped to his back. A couple of scouts, bows over their shoulders. The last few were fighters with a range of weapons and armor.

My inner geek squeed excitedly.

Chapter 27: Adventure

"So, what's your name?" asked one of the fighters, who was dressed only in leather armor and armed with a pair of short swords. The dual swords were a surprise; my time with Christine had proven wielding such weapons was tough to pull off. "I'm Bill. Can't say I've met many court mages. Well, *any* court mages, really."

There hadn't been full introductions with our escorts, which I was actually a little thankful for. Divine blessing or not, I didn't fancy my chances of remembering eleven names fired off in quick succession. Instead, we'd just heard from each party's leader: Philip of the Blue Sparrows, Toby of Crizantis, and James of James's Posse. Not that the hulking barbarian had really needed to give his name after identifying his party as "James's Posse"; the other three members were all women.

The fighter trying to get to know me was part of Crizantis, the three-man party. Their leader was the mage, a lanky man by the name of Toby, and the last member was another of the fighters. It seemed like a rather unbalanced party compared to the other two, which each consisted of one mage, healer, front-liner, and scout.

"Thomas Smith," I replied, cognizant of the fact I was supposed to be incognito and not wanting to give too much away. "And you'll be pleased to know that court mages are, to the best of my knowledge, no different from anyone else. Except perhaps for a minor tendency to jump out of windows and occasionally blow stuff up."

"It was one time!" exclaimed Wendy. "*Once!*"

I peered at her in confusion.

"Oh? You weren't talking about me?" she asked, blushing slightly.

"No. No, I wasn't, but now I want to know which 'one time' you're referring to."

She didn't respond, leaving us to continue a little farther down

the city street in silence, Bill giving nothing more than an amused smile at the exchange.

Once again, cognizant of the fact I was supposed to be disguised, I was trying my best not to gawk in every direction as we walked past homes, stores, and workshops. A blacksmith was hammering away at an anvil. A tanner was laboring away at a rack. Through an open window, I saw someone busy at a complex glass apparatus.

One thing that was constant was that land was not wasted. People did not have gardens; they had miniature farms. Between the road and homes were rows of green leaves, as people made the most of the available space. None of it looked particularly healthy, but they were certainly trying.

We passed another workshop, the person within working diligently at a desk, peering through a magnifying glass as he tinkered with something I couldn't see. I'd have guessed he was a jeweler, except for the jar of eyeballs on his desk. An eyeball would be a *really* weird decoration for a bit of jewelry. A quick subvocal cast of Maius Omnium Visus, and I could see the mana spiraling around his hands as he worked. An enchanter, maybe?

I wanted to ask questions. *So* many questions. Damn this whole disguise thing.

With my mana sight active, I risked a quick glance around at our escorts, noting a few enchanted items between them. Both healers had matching enchanted pendants, which was mildly interesting with them being in different parties. The staves of the pair of mages were obviously magical, but I spotted a dent or two that seemed to confirm Wendy's claim that the only reason to use a magical staff instead of something more compact was so you could bash things with it.

And then I glanced at the third mage and froze up. He caught me looking, meeting my gaze and raising an eyebrow, which was enough of a kick to get me to look away again.

It hadn't been the mana sight. He was carrying a few enchanted objects, but nothing that caught my attention. Rather, it was the soul sight—the silvery light that came from Animae Visus, which was, of course, included with Maius Omnium Visus. So far, I'd never seen

anything interesting with it, just a silvery overlay draped over each person. It was handy for seeing people through walls, but it didn't show anything that life sight—Vitae Visus—didn't.

Normally.

The red haze of life sight had matched his visible silhouette exactly, but soul sight showed a long, swaying tail behind him and tall catlike ears atop his head. No one had mentioned this world containing beastkin, and besides, he didn't *actually* have ears or a tail. Or if he did, I couldn't see them. Were illusions a thing? If so, would they be good enough for me to not detect any mana with my superpowered sight spell? Or see them with any other component of Maius Omnium Visus? Why would they only show up to soul sight?

It was a question that shot straight up my list of things I needed to ask at the first opportunity, but that opportunity was unlikely to come for a while. Still, it could have been worse. His soul could have had demonic horns or wings or something.

We passed through the main gates of the city, the road continuing beyond. Both sides were lined with fields in which unhealthy yellow plants were growing, butting right up against the city walls.

My first thought was that in their desperation to grow as much as possible, they'd depleted the soil. That wasn't the case at all, though. With Maius Omnium Visus I could see the problem: tiny motes of miasma in the soil and plants. It seemed there wasn't a clean distinction between the corrupted lands and elsewhere; rather, it was a sliding scale. Even "usable" land was tainted. In fact, now that I'd realized what I was looking at, I could see that this had been true inside the city too, and even the castle. No wonder the plants there had been unhealthy. In my inexperience, I'd simply mistaken the low-level corruption for how mana was *supposed* to look.

Then the Chiral Plains that the war was being fought over were uncorrupted?

Dammit, more questions I needed to ask. I was feeling seriously undereducated for this mission.

"So, now that we're out of the city, is anyone going to tell us what this is actually all about?" asked the mountain of meat

apparently known as James.

"We will head a short distance into the corrupted lands, perform an experiment, and then return," answered Christine.

"Come on, we need more than that," he sighed. "How long will this experiment take? Will we need to defend a specific location for any length of time, or will you remain mobile? Will this experiment do anything to attract monsters, or will it require the presence of monsters to conduct?"

"A few minutes, but we'll want to spend some time investigating the results, no, and no."

"Sheesh. She doesn't talk much, does she?"

"She's a professional, but she has her moments," I laughed.

"Well, if she's a professional, she should know the importance of planning ahead. Only a suicidal fool goes into a mission blind."

"I believe I've covered all the important details," declared Christine.

"Fine," huffed the barbarian, who I felt wasn't fitting the stereotype at all. He was making good, intelligent points. Being intelligent wasn't the role of a buff barbarian; most fantasy systems agreed they were supposed to have muscles where their brains should be.

"So, what do you make of all this?" Bill asked me.

"I'm just here to do a job, same as you," I lied. "I'd quite like to be back in my quarters, not out here."

"Ha. Sure. Must be nice to have a swanky room to go back to, servants at your beck and call, and all the food you can eat."

"I'd like to think I don't eat more than my share," I said, poking my flat belly. "Probably less than I should, really, but I suspect that's true of all conscientious people these days."

"Oi!" yelled Benjamin.

"Huh?"

"There's no call to keep insulting us!"

"I, um, didn't?" I said, confused.

"You just accused us of eating too much!"

"I have no idea how much you eat. If you heard my statement and felt insulted by it, that's on your head."

“Oh, shut up,” Wendy snapped at Benjamin. “You’re only here as a mana battery, so be a good little boy and walk quietly.”

“And I don’t want a little girl like you telling...” started Benjamin before seizing up. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, his breathing shallow and erratic.

“Cut it out,” demanded Christine, her voice laced with mana.

“Y-Yes...” stammered Benjamin.

That was a neat trick, another one I was going to need to learn.

Under proper adult supervision, obviously.

“Wow, that was impressive,” said Bill as we resumed our march.

“It was, wasn’t it?” I agreed.

“Oh, it’s not *her* I was talking about. Lady Christine is famous in the capital. She’s the youngest female knight to ever get a royal appointment! I’d be disappointed if she couldn’t do that much. No, I was talking about *you*.”

“Huh? Me?”

“You *aren’t* famous. Never even heard of you before. I was practically pissing myself back there, but you stood in the middle of that much intimidation and didn’t even flinch. That’s some serious nerve you’ve got.”

Seriously? But I hadn’t felt anything! Dammit, Christine! I wanted to yell at her that *she* was the one ruining my cover story, but I couldn’t without ruining my cover story.

“I’m not really sure what to say. Maybe I’ve watched over a few too many of the knights’ training sessions.”

Alas, that spat put something of a damper on the mood, so we marched in silence through continuous fields. Every now and again, we passed someone tending them. Most were mages, doing their best to fertilize the soil and lessen the poisoning effects of the miasma.

We kept on with only a few breaks, and the sun soon began to set.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” declared Christine.

“Oh, thank goodness,” sighed Taylor. “I thought my feet were going to drop off.”

“I know how you feel,” agreed Juan.

Benjamin looked very much like he was going to echo them, but then he fearfully glanced at Christine and held his mouth shut.

"And again, I'm impressed," said Bill. "All that walking with not a single complaint."

"Hey, I'm fit enough to walk a long distance!" I complained. "Doesn't stop me getting blisters, of course, but this robe isn't for show."

Bill grinned, then gave a slightly out-of-place wink before fleeing over to the others, where they were discussing the watch schedule.

"Uh..." I commented.

"If you're going to heal yourself, at least heal everyone else too," sighed Christine.

"Why are you sighing?!"

It wasn't as if the slayers needed healing; they all were used to walking long distances. The three court mages were thankful for a cast of Parvus Sanatio, though. Or two of them were, at least, while Benjamin made a noncommittal grunt. Wendy waved me away, though.

"Your feet are still fine?" I asked her.

"Ha. Not very observant, are you?" she laughed.

I peered at her feet, not spotting anything interesting about them.

The shadow was a little odd, though.

Suspicious, I stooped to ground level and peered. She was hovering half an inch from the road!

"You're flying!" I accused. "You haven't been walking at all!"

She smirked triumphantly.

The words "teach me" almost escaped my lips, but I was supposed to be playing the role of a white mage. I couldn't be seen using flight magic right now. Darn. "I don't suppose we have soundproof tents or anything?" I sighed.

"Nope, so you'll just need to keep it in your pants until we get back."

Once again, I bit down on my impulsive response. At such short notice, I couldn't come up with a better explanation for why I'd want to talk to her privately.

The slayers probably hadn't heard anyway, and the fact that Bill flashed me a wink was completely coincidental.

I'd changed my mind on this whole disguise thing. Surely we'd be better off with people who knew me, simply so that I could talk openly! This was a lot of potential education time that was being wasted. Then again, I probably needed to be wary of more than just the people in the immediate vicinity. Having used Exploratio myself, I knew how easy it was to spy on unprotected areas, and it wasn't as if the open road were warded. In that respect, having strangers around might well be a good thing, because it reminded me to keep my mouth shut.

The slayers soon decided on a schedule, which included Christine but not us five mages, and so our first day of travel came to an end.

Chapter 28: Purification

It wasn't long into our second day of travel before the landscape started to change. The fields grew even less healthy, and thin stalks twisted at strange angles, with no signs of anything suitable for harvest. And then the plants just cut out completely. There weren't even any weeds.

The road continued through the barren landscape, albeit in obvious disrepair. Presumably it had been built at a time when this land was viable living space, and the region had been corrupted since. A subvocal cast of Maius Omnium Visus showed the strands of miasma threaded through soil and rock alike, the feelers waving in the air. It was just like in my dream, except here they were far less dense.

"Incoming," called Philip, the leader of the Blue Sparrows. He was one of the scouts, but was a rather taciturn guy, along with the rest of his party. Unlike the other two parties, they'd gone the entire previous day without introducing themselves, so I still didn't have their names. "Three giant rats."

"Small fry," declared James, unsheathing his massive sword.

As the name suggested, the monsters that approached had the appearance of rats. They were simply giant, their eyes level with my waist. With my active mana sight, I could see miasma running through them. In fact, they looked very much like how humans looked while using body strengthening, which I doubted was a coincidence.

James performed a simple forward thrust, despite the unwieldy appearance of his weapon. The massive sword stabbed into the first rat's open mouth, skewering it.

"Pesky vermin," muttered one of the mages, smashing the second rat over the head with her staff and caving in the skull.

Christine killed the third with a casual thrust between the eyes,

pushing her sword through the skull with no apparent difficulty, despite not using body strengthening.

"This area will do," said Christine. "Researching the effect on monsters isn't part of our assignment, but since a few decided to deliver themselves to us, we might as well make use of them."

"We thank you for your noble sacrifice," Wendy spat sarcastically, giving one of the corpses a kick.

I could see the cause of her displeasure. Blood flowed from the dead monsters, still containing miasma, and where it soaked into the soil, it remained, adding to the density of the poison. Had these monsters been slain on fertile ground, it would've become just a little more toxic—the harvest reduced, and the corrupted lands expanded, pushing out the humanoid races.

"Let's just get this over with so we can go home," sighed Benjamin.

"Right. We all know our roles," declared Wendy. "Form up."

We five "mages" stood in a circle, holding hands. They did indeed know their roles: to stand there and do nothing.

Okay, perhaps that was being a *little* harsh; my mana sight had shown mana flickering around them all, and I had no doubt they'd activated perception spells of their own, ready to watch the experiment. They'd also have an important role after the fact, assuming I managed to do anything: investigating the results.

Doing something was on me, so I imagined mana ripping out the corruption and erasing it.

It wasn't enough. The magic simply wasn't there. Pursing my mouth for the "m" was enough to feel that the usual involuntary rendition of the name of a spell simply wasn't happening.

Things were going to get *really* awkward if it turned out I couldn't even *cast* the spell, let alone use it to purify land.

When I'd cured Mary, my image had been dead simple. I'd just wanted mana to make her better, and indeed, it had affected her in ways other than removing miasma. Was I trying to overcomplicate things here, then? I tweaked my image from a concrete removal of miasma to a broader "make the land better," but there was still no response.

What else was different? The neon-flashing obvious difference was that I was trying to cast it on the landscape instead of a person, but if that was the problem, we were screwed. I needed to work through the other possibilities first.

Emotion? I'd been angry and desperate back then. Wendy had never mentioned emotions having an impact on a spell, but it was the next largest difference I could come up with. But how was I supposed to make myself that angry and desperate on demand? Realistically, I couldn't.

I tried to do the next best thing, imagining what would happen if I failed. Mary starving to death as the survivors killed each other over the last scraps of food. And yes, Wendy and Christine as well.

Or maybe not Christine. I could imagine the king giving an order to cull half the population and Christine obeying, because it was the only way to save the other half.

Apparently, I *could* make myself that angry after all. It started as a simple stray thought, but I could instantly picture it happening in perfect clarity. The king, feeling bad about giving the order but giving it anyway. He'd say something about how as a father he was torn up inside, but as a king he had no choice but to do his duty. The knights would follow it for much the same reason. How would they decide who to kill? Random lottery? Would they take out whole families? Would they start with the elderly and infirm? Criminals? What about people like Mary, who didn't directly add to the productivity of the kingdom?

There was no way in hell I could let that vision come true.

"**Miraculum**!"

That was the image. It wasn't a spell for purification, or even for healing. It was a spell to save the innocent. A spell to correct injustice. It was a spell to bring hope when all hope seemed lost. It was a spell to cause a miracle.

The other four mages gasped, unlinking hands as if stung. Mages and slayers alike started swearing. In the wide-open space, the spell's name didn't echo, but it was still impossibly loud and full of alien harmonics that made it difficult to believe it came from my throat.

Not that my throat was having a good time of it. Just like the previous casting, I broke into a coughing fit, splattering the ground with blood. Still, at least I managed to remain upright; my mana capacity had obviously grown again.

"**Sanatio**," I gasped between coughs, managing to heal myself up enough to stop showering the dead soil. "Urk. First lesson learned from this experiment: We need a healer on standby who isn't taking part in the casting, ready to undo the damage."

"Subvocal casting?" suggested Wendy.

"No way. With the force behind it, trying to do it subvocally would rupture something."

"More importantly, did it work?" asked Christine.

"Yup. Not a single shred of miasma visible within range of my mana sight. Even in the monster corpses."

The slayers stopped cursing. "**Magiae Visus**!" rushed out one of the mages before emitting one last extra colorful swear word.

"Did you seriously just..." started James, stopping before the end of the sentence. No one seemed to want to say it out loud.

"Purify a patch of corrupted land," finished Christine. "Yes, we did. And now I hope you understand the need for secrecy around this mission. In any case, our work is not yet over. We need to measure the area of effect. Would someone also drain one of the corpses? We need to bring one back to test if it has been rendered safe for consumption. Mages, how is your—?"

"Demon!" screamed one of the healers.

The purified land was instantly forgotten as everyone drew weapons, the slayers expertly sliding into formation.

"No! Toby!" continued the healer, causing everyone to spin round toward Crizantis.

The mage of their party—who I'd previously spotted with ears and a tail visible to my soul sight—now had them for real. So no one had mentioned beastkin because they called beastkin demons?! Dammit, if not for the lack of privacy, or if someone had ever described demons to me back in the castle, we could have discovered him yesterday!

Was Bill working with him? He'd certainly been asking me lots of

questions.

"What?" asked Toby, who looked genuinely confused. "Why would you...accuse me...?"

His feline ears twitched atop his head. He carefully felt behind him, poking his own tail.

His expression instantly hardened. "**Caligo**!" he shouted, and a dark fog rolled out of nowhere above his head, pouring down, enveloping him and rolling toward everyone else.

"**Ventus**!" shouted Wendy, conjuring up a heavy wind that kept the fog at bay. A stronger wind would have been better—maybe even would have uncovered the demon—but it'd risk throwing our own side off-balance.

"He's over there!" I shouted, pointing at where I could still see him with my enhanced vision. The fog did a good job of blocking visible light, but not anything else. I could see him clearly in a half dozen overlays.

"Why are you helping the taboo breakers?" came a voice out of the fog. "I wonder what lies they've been filling your head with. But then, you aren't *completely* sure, are you?"

"T-Toby?" stuttered Bill. "Are... Are you really—?"

"What? A spy? What does it look like?! I cut my own ears off and cursed the wounds to pass as one of you evil creatures, and then the kingdom's pet hero goes and spoils my disguise by *curing* them despite the curse. I have to admit, though, part of me is thankful; I thought I'd be scarred for the rest of my life."

"Hero?!" questioned Bill.

"Stop engaging with him," demanded Christine. "He's buying time. There must be a support squad nearby, and he's no doubt signaled them."

An annoyed tongue click came from the fog.

"**Procella**!" shouted Wendy.

The bank of fog twisted, leaping into the air in a miniature whirlwind, but Toby dodged, evading the magic. It did, however, mean that he left the camouflage of the fog, and Christine instantly blurred, employing body strengthening to close the distance.

Toby dodged with a dexterity I wouldn't have expected from a

mage, matching Christine for speed.

"Incoming!" shouted Philip. "Not demons. More giant rats."

"Seriously? What's with this timing?!" complained James.

"Over here too!" shouted Lindy, the scout from James's Posse. "A dozen rats!"

"The hell? Did he do something to attract monsters?!" exclaimed Wendy.

"No!" denied Toby, still locked in a lethal game of tag with Christine. "This isn't the time to fight. I'll leave, so concentrate on protecting your hero."

"We can't have you delivering whatever intelligence you've gathered today," denied Christine, not stopping. "Besides, you'll just return after linking up with the rest of your group."

"Damn you, human dog! You're going to get the continent's last hope killed!"

"**Conflagratio**!" shouted Wendy, and one group of rats burst into flames. Even though the blood boiled away, miasma still leaked from them, polluting my freshly cleansed land. "As if a few rats could pose a threat."

"Hey..." complained Taylor. "This trip wasn't supposed to be dangerous! This wasn't what we agreed to!"

"We're at war, you idiot!" shouted Benjamin. "Sitting in your own home is dangerous!"

As irritating as the guy was, I had to admit he was prepared to stick his neck out. He'd done his job in the castle's ritual chamber, even when it had become obvious his side was outmatched, and he had no intention of bolting here either.

The other two, who'd leaped from a window to get away from me... I could only hope they weren't about to do something stupid.

"It's not just rats!" shouted someone, but in the mounting chaos, I didn't see who. "Incoming wolf pack from the north!"

"Still small fry, but I can't believe this is coincidence. I don't see any signs of magic, though. What about you, Thomas?"

"I haven't seen anyone cast any spells I don't recognize, and no one but Toby has used any enchanted items."

"Huh? He's way out of Magiae Visus range!" complained one of

the mages.

"I'm not using Magiae Visus. He crushed one of his earrings while he was in the fog. It was definitely enchanted."

"Dammit, so it *was* him."

The slayers finished dispatching the rats and turned on the approaching wolves. The monsters' fur was matted, their eyes enlarged and pitch black, giving them a somewhat monstrous look even without the aid of mana sight showing the miasma pumping through their bodies. Nevertheless, a wind blade and an arrow tore through the air, instantly killing two of them.

"I can't say. I have no idea what it did, just that it was enchanted."

Even if Toby could hear us, he no longer had the leeway to respond. Fast as he might have been, Christine obviously had him beat on stamina, and he was flagging. He was already bleeding from several nicks.

"Giant boar from the north!" yelled someone from the middle of the melee with the remaining wolves.

"Dammit! That settles it. There shouldn't be any giant boars this close to the border of the corrupted lands."

"More demons! Twenty of them from the south!"

"Wh-What...? We can't fight that many!"

"**Prospectus**!" I chanted, deciding the time for disguises had long since flown. By whatever method, Toby had already worked out I was a hero, so giving him more evidence wouldn't hurt. Either the demons died here, and hence couldn't tell anyone, or they didn't, in which case the cat was firmly out of the bag, whatever I did.

I opened a window high above me looking down, projecting its view onto the floor. Through it, I could see the charging boar, eyes of fire and fury. Getting a sense of scale was difficult, but the thing looked bigger than a horse.

On the other side was a group of twenty humanoids, each with distinct animalistic features. Some simply had fluffy ears. Others were far less human, with animal heads stuck to bodies that were only vaguely humanoid.

Toby was giving his all to defense, trying to cling to life until

backup arrived. Christine was equally adamant that was not going to happen.

"Well, this sucks," I complained.

Chapter 29: Standoff

Toby changed his strategy, performing a fighting withdrawal as he shifted their duel in the direction of his teammates. The shield of a Scutum cast appeared in the way of Christine's blade, and another in front of her ankle. She burst through both, but there was a momentary delay, enough for Toby to get some distance. Still casting subvocally, he conjured up a blast of wind in her face, slowing her further.

Most people didn't have the mana capacity of me or Wendy, so I knew what I'd seen in training wasn't a good guide to regular mages. Quick-firing spells like that would leave him exhausted in minutes, or maybe even less, but he obviously no longer cared. He'd bought enough time.

The moment his allies came into range, fireballs and blades of wind were launched from the demon side, driving Christine back.

"Dammit!" she swore, giving up on her pursuit and returning to our group. "He was way beyond C Rank."

"Sorry to disappoint you, missy," called Toby, smirking.

On our side, our escorts had finished dispatching the wolves, but the giant boar was visible to us all, only seconds away.

"James's Posse, take the boar. Everyone else, form up," shouted Christine, taking back command.

Our group did as ordered, leaving us with twelve facing twenty-one—and I was fairly sure a couple of ours didn't count, with Taylor and Juan looking on the verge of panic. If everyone on the other side could fight on the level of Toby, we didn't stand a chance.

Thankfully, they didn't attack, stopping within shouting distance. And shout they did.

"We request parley!"

No one on our side seemed to be expecting that. Taylor even showed a glimmer of hope.

"Thomas, how much mana capacity do you have remaining?" asked Christine.

"Maybe half? I'm not good at guessing."

"That's enough. Hit them with Maius Conflagratio repeatedly. With them bunched together like that, you can probably take a bunch of them out, or even if they can defend, you'll exhaust their mages."

"What? No!"

"They're here for *you*!"

"They want to *talk*!"

"Only because a frontal confrontation puts you at risk. They want access to Miraculum and to ensure you don't fight them. Nothing else."

"What do you want?!" I yelled back, ignoring Christine.

"Your safety!" replied their apparent leader, a lion-headed demon whose bulk put even James to shame. "Our scouts report *all* monsters they can see are converging on this location, and we have scout positions *miles* out! There's a flock of wyverns minutes away! There are groups of crawlers and giant spiders not far behind, and who knows what's coming from outside the radius we have under watch."

"You're lying! Or if you aren't, you're the ones who brought them here," interjected Christine.

"Open your eyes, woman!" yelled back Toby. "You know full well what attracted them, and it wasn't us!"

"We propose a simple armistice," continued the spokes-lion. "All of you, clear out of here. Get your hero to safety! We'll defend your backs long enough for you to escape."

"Why would you do that?!" I shouted back. "You'd be risking your lives to let the humans have me back."

"I don't know what you've been told, but we're fighting a punitive war. Ricousian used taboo magic against our citizens, and we will see to it that they pay dearly enough that no one risks doing so again. Your existence is orthogonal to that objective, and if you have the ability to purify corrupted land, it's a benefit to the entire continent. As long as you don't interfere with us, we have no need to interfere with you."

This time, it was Wendy's turn to interject. "What taboo magic?" she yelled back. "That's the first I'm hearing about this!"

"It wouldn't surprise me if they're lying to more than their hero. If you want the details, question your people yourself, since I doubt you'll believe anything I say."

"I dunno about anything else, but he's right about the wyverns," said the Blue Sparrows' leader. "I can see them now. There are...quite a lot..."

"What stops them from attacking us from behind?" asked James, returning from the fight against the boar, apparently having heard the shouted conversation.

"Thomas stops them," sighed Christine. "They're trying to talk him over to their side, and apparently doing a damn good job of it. They won't attack right after saying they wouldn't, because it would destroy his trust."

"Is he telling the truth about taboo magic?" I asked.

"Not that I'm aware of," replied Christine after a moment's hesitation.

"I assume that by taboo magic, they mean things like mind control, which you described as lines that mustn't be crossed?"

"Yes."

"Let's leave," I declared.

Christine glared, but soon slumped. "If you are unwilling to fight, we have no hope of victory. There's no choice, then. Let's return."

She turned and shouted back at the demons. "Very well. We accept your offer!"

And so our group fled, abandoning the purified monsters and the healed land.

"Let me warn you about one more thing!" yelled the demon's leader. "Two days ago, the human king tried to surrender. Your presence here means we cannot accept it. Stripping Ricousian of its farmland was intended to cause the kingdom immense hardship, but having the ability to make more undoes that. We have little choice but to continue to fight to ensure Ricousian is suitably punished. If you want to avoid that, I suggest you move to dwarven or elven lands, to deprive the humans of your abilities."

"Then let me give a warning of my own," I replied, stopping and facing the demon leader. "Punishment should be dealt to the people at fault. If you slaughter innocent civilians under the guise of 'punishment,' you'll find that my neutrality won't last very long."

"I will be sure to pass that on," he replied as the wyverns began their descent. The last I saw before I turned and resumed running was him grabbing one out of the air, his fist closing around its neck.

"Damn them," complained Christine as we ran.

"What was that about a hero?" asked James, staring at me.

"Before that, bind Bill and David."

"What?!" exclaimed Bill.

David—the second fighter of Crizantis—was too shocked to even respond.

"You were working with a demon. Furthermore, yesterday I heard you questioning Thomas and implying that you believed his story to be a lie."

"Only because Toby was talking about him, saying he may not be a real court mage! He was using me!"

"Feel free to give your explanations to the investigators back in Odimere. Until then, I must assume you were willing accomplices."

"Binding and carrying them will slow us down, and I think it would be advisable to get back to the capital today," said James. "I agree we should take their weapons and keep watch over them."

"James!" shouted David. "How many seasons have we known each other?! This is hardly the first mission we've done together!"

"I thought I'd known Toby for ages too," replied James sadly.

David fell silent.

"He could have been replaced recently?" suggested Bill, but he sounded doubtful. "Fine, take my swords, but you damn well better take care of them."

David—very obviously frustrated but seeing no way out—handed over the short spear that he'd been using as a weapon. The extra weight didn't seem to burden James at all.

"I... I can't...keep running...at this...speed," panted Juan.

Christine grabbed him and threw him over her shoulder. A touch of body strengthening ensured she wasn't bothered by the weight

either.

"**Ventus**," chanted Wendy, summoning up a tailwind at our backs.

"So, Christine, about that little pause?" I asked.

"What little pause?"

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I mean."

"The whole Mary thing proved you haven't been telling me everything either," said Wendy. "Please, *please* tell me King Edward did not approve the use of taboo magic."

"I am not aware of the use of taboo magic."

"You don't *know*, but you *suspect* something," I suggested.

Christine remained silent.

"Come on! This is serious!" shouted Wendy.

"Let me help," I suggested. "I was told the war was started by nobles of the Chiral Plains stealing a fraction of the demon's harvest. At the time of the explanation, I had no idea how they expected to get away with it. There was no way the demons wouldn't notice the theft."

"I have had the same thought," admitted Christine reluctantly. "The nobles involved were not incompetent, and I assumed there was more to the story. I did not expect it to be taboo magic."

"You think human mages brainwashed demons to hand over a fraction of their harvest?!" exclaimed Wendy, aghast.

"We're letting the demons get to us," sighed Christine. "Ignore their mind games. More important is what we do next. Our experiment was spoiled, and if the demons refuse to accept our surrender, I don't see any way forward for the kingdom. Land will mean nothing if no one is left to live on it."

"If they refuse to accept surrender under the original terms, think up something else. Offer a fraction of your harvest or whatever," I suggested.

"You told the demons you wouldn't let them slaughter innocents. What difference does it make to you if the demons kill them directly, or if they are made to starve over a period of weeks or seasons? If anything, letting the demons slaughter our people would be kinder. The suffering would be over quicker."

"Then trade tariffs! Gold! Labor!"

"Far be it from me to play devil's advocate, especially if our side did use taboo magic, but do you really think what the demons are doing is proportionate? If our side did everything they accused us of, then it involves half a dozen nobles, the mages that directly report to them, and probably some of the less savory sort of slayers. Maybe one hundred to two hundred people. Tens of thousands have died in the fighting already, and we have no idea as to the state of our captured settlements and the residents who couldn't evacuate in time. Even if the demons didn't purge or enslave them, I doubt they'll be donating their own precious food supplies."

That was a valid point, but King Edward had already admitted hostilities hadn't broken out immediately.

"I think this turned into a battle against the kingdom itself at the point King Edward tried to cover it up instead of admitting fault and handing over the perpetrators. But yes, I think humanity has been suitably chastised already. Since my cover's been blown, maybe my name will help force a ceasefire."

"You're really going to have to explain this hero thing," grumbled James.

"The experiment wasn't *completely* spoiled, by the way," pointed out Wendy. "In this direction at least, the range of the spell was substantial. It's possible it was shorter in the opposite direction, deeper into the corrupted lands where miasma was denser."

Oh, right! Our perception spells were still running. We were out of the corrupted lands already, but the fields on either side of us didn't contain a trace of miasma. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the plants already seemed a little healthier.

How far had we run? Had it been a mile? Two miles? I had no idea, but hopefully the others did.

We had to continue a little farther before any signs of miasma reappeared.

"And you said you had half your mana left..." whistled Wendy. "Impressive. So, if you could cast that twice a day, and making the assumption the effect is circular... Urk, is it my imagination, or is math harder while you're sprinting? Anyway, at a *very* rough

estimate, I think purifying the continent will take you, umm, somewhere over five thousand seasons."

"Uh..." I said. "It sounds a *lot* less impressive when you phrase it like that. And you're not accounting for the fact that we seemed to summon a horde of monsters."

"Well, yes, obviously you won't be able to do the entire continent yourself at that rate. You were asking about staves, and I think this is the perfect opportunity to make one of your own, with this spell embedded. We'll need to produce several and send teams of mages around with each one to supply the mana. Or if your mana keeps growing, I suppose you could just invent Maius Miraculum and do the whole kingdom at once."

Chapter 30: Report

We couldn't do the entire journey at a sprint. Taylor was the next to fall, followed by Benjamin, but after half an hour, the less physically inclined of the slayers were starting to flag too, and we ran out of people capable of carrying them.

Or, looked at another way, our group had just *sprinted for half an hour*. I might have had hero cheats, but the others didn't. Everyone was using body strengthening on some level. Juan's performance wasn't something I'd describe as superhuman, but everyone else's certainly was. Even Taylor's.

Though we did slow down, it was only to a jog, with Christine still worried about a demon ambush. She refused to stop to rest for more than five minutes at a time and didn't relax until we were safely back behind the walls of Odimere, where Bill and David were handed over to a group of sullen guards.

But even then, her relaxation didn't last long.

"Something's off," she said, a hand drifting to the hilt of her sword.

"You're not wrong," agreed James, looking around. "I thought the gate guards were acting oddly, but I assumed that was just because we were reporting a demon spy. This is the whole city, though. I've never seen it like this."

Not having a great idea of what the city was like normally, I wasn't sure what "this" was. The streets were certainly quieter than when we'd left, but that could simply have been due to the time of evening; the sun was already setting. I hadn't noticed the guards acting oddly either, but having never entered the city through a traditional gate before, I once again had no idea what was normal.

"It's not fear, and there's no panic," said Lindy. "This is something else. Resignation? Depression? Anger? A strange mix, for sure."

"It seems there's no imminent emergency," said Wendy. "Let's get

back to the castle."

As we trudged up the main street, finally moving at a simple walking pace, the strange mood became apparent even to me. The word I would have used was "subdued." Conversations were whispered. No one seemed to be doing anything—just sitting, or leaning against walls staring into the sky. It was as if they were simply waiting.

"What the hell?!" exclaimed Wendy as we stepped into a plaza near the castle.

In the center was a wooden structure that certainly hadn't been there yesterday morning: a raised platform, a thick wooden beam above it, a couple of lengths of rope hanging from it. Neither had a noose at the end, but perhaps there was an obvious explanation for why...

"It's been used. Twice," said James, confirming my guess that they were gallows.

"No executions were scheduled," said Christine. "If there were, I'd certainly have heard about it."

"It must be related to the mood in the city," said Lindy.

"More demon spies?" I suggested.

"Let's keep going. There's no point standing around and debating it."

The castle seemed unchanged, which was a good sign. Then again, since the guards tended to stand around in watchful silence anyway—which was, after all, their job—they couldn't exactly get *more* broody.

"You're back early," stated the guard at the front door. "The king wanted to see you immediately on arrival, but as he wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow, I imagine it'll take some time to get an audience. Please take a seat in the third waiting room."

"The *third*?" frowned Christine.

"The third," confirmed the guard. "There's a queue."

"I believe this is where we part ways," said James as the door-in-the-door swung open. "If you would, please?" he added, holding out a hand.

Christine took a pair of metal disks out from a pocket and handed

one to James and the other to Philip.

"It was a pleasure working with you," she said, but I felt that while the words were a good start, she could have put more effort into sounding like she meant it.

"It was certainly interesting," said James. "Demon attacks aren't something we normally worry about as slayers. And you never did explain what this hero business is all about."

"And I hope you never do," said Philip. "Whatever that was, I don't want to know. I'm going to collect my pay, spend it on ale, and never take a job that involves the words 'royal' or 'court' again."

"I don't see any point in us hanging around either," said Benjamin. "We were only there as a cover story to begin with. A cover that turned out to be completely pointless, I might add."

Christine waved them off.

"Thanks for your time," I called as they left, feeling that a little politeness wouldn't go amiss.

"What do they do when they aren't jogging cross-country, complaining about blisters?" I asked as we took our seats in a rather cramped room a short distance away from the castle's front door.

"Those three? They're part of the fertility team, researching ways of improving our harvests," said Wendy. "Their current project is breeding miasma-resistant varieties. It's easy enough to do. The problem is that the results are all poisonous, in the same way that monster meat is poisonous. They're trying to breed crops that store miasma in specific parts of the plant, leaving the rest edible, but so far they've not had any luck."

The concept of an entire society built around maximizing food production had been strange enough to start with, but now that I'd witnessed it in action over the past couple of days, the oddness was more striking. The way James had just casually mentioned not being worried about demons, for example. The slayers killed monsters, and hence prevented the corrupted lands from expanding. The demons did not want the corrupted lands to spread any more than the humans did. Therefore, the slayers did not join the war effort, and the demons did not attack the slayers.

We were made to wait a couple of hours before we were finally

called. We weren't even provided with snacks, although we still had our packs, and being a day ahead of schedule, they still contained plentiful rations.

Wendy, who had fallen asleep waiting, awoke with a snort.

"The hero Thomas Smith, the royal knight Christine Standler, and the court mage Wendy Windchild," declared a herald as a guard pushed open the throne room door.

The queen wasn't present, her throne unoccupied, and the king was slouched, face in his palm, not half as regal as in our last meeting.

Although he was still more regal than after the stew incident.

"Prince George?" asked Christine in confusion, and the "king" finally looked up, glaring at us with hate.

It was indeed not King Edward sitting on the throne. Thinking back again to the conversation that followed the stew incident, I recalled that Prince George was King Edward's oldest son and next in line to the throne. Then, for him to be sitting there—

"That's *King* George to you," he snapped.

—The former king would need to be dead.

"What happened?" fired back Christine.

"*You* did!" he exclaimed. "But we'll visit that later. For now, report on your mission."

"As you command," replied a very uncertain Christine. "We successfully reached the corrupted lands, about one mile in, where Thomas was able to perform Miraculum. The spell successfully purged the land of miasma, but it also uncovered one of our escorts as a demon spy. We were attacked by waves of monsters, but it was inconclusive as to whether they were drawn by the demons or by Miraculum. An entire demon platoon showed up, and we were forced to retreat without recording the exact effects of Miraculum. We did confirm that the effect extended for more than two miles in the direction of our retreat, and that it purified the corpses of monsters. We didn't test for edibility."

"Show me," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Cast it. Here and now. If you were only one mile into the

corrupted lands when the spell was cast and yet you measured an effective radius of more than two during a retreat, logic dictates that it must have purged traces of miasma from land that was already considered viable. That means there's the possibility of making the land around here every bit as productive as the Chiral Plains. In the short term, that's more valuable than reclaiming more land. Fields are already planted, so we'll see tangible results far sooner."

That seemed perfectly logical, and two hours waiting around meant that I had plenty of mana, so I saw no reason not to oblige. "**Miraculum**!"

As ever, each syllable slammed into the world like a hammer against a gong. Banners hanging from the rafters swayed as if in a breeze, dust raining down from them. Lights flickered. I sprayed blood over the luxurious carpet, which at least was already red, so hopefully the stains would hardly show.

"So you truly can cast it on demand," sighed the presumed king as I subvocally cast Sanatio on myself. "I almost wish you could not. I will have the results checked. If they look promising, I will have you circle the area around the capital, improving the quality of the farmland. We *must* improve this season's harvest."

"Why do you wish he couldn't?" asked Wendy, every bit as confused and uncertain as Christine.

"Because I want *him* to hang!" shouted back King George, face red with rage. "His refusal to fight has cost countless lives, not least my sister, my mother, and my father. And my family wasn't even permitted dignity in death. My sister is to become a mindless doll, existing only to fulfill his every whim. My parents were executed in public, disgraced, not even permitted a funeral, and the corpses handed over to the demons to display in their capital."

Wendy's mouth dropped open. Mine probably did the same. Christine at least managed to squeeze out a comprehensible "What?"

"Isn't it obvious? Father surrendered to the demons, but they were no longer content with merely taking our land. Thanks to Miraculum, they said their old demands wouldn't hurt us enough. Father asked them what it would take to stop the fighting. They

demanded his head, along with Mother's."

"The timeline makes no sense," I pointed out. The leader of the demon group certainly hadn't seemed to know surrender was imminent. "We've only just reported that Miraculum worked."

"You think we weren't watching you?!" shouted back the new king, launching spittle an impressive distance along the carpet, which made me feel a little better about the blood. "Both us and the demons had every scryer available spying on your little experiment. The moment you parted from the demons' group, Father signed the surrender. If he hadn't... Port Hope was already under siege, and its walls were built to keep out monsters, not demons. It would have fallen today. Even had the demons returned it after our surrender, any damage to the port in the fighting would have prevented supplies reaching us from the elves—and given the terms of the surrender, we *need* them. In exchange for keeping the forfeit section of the Chiral Plains for seven seasons, we're returning five times the amount of food that was stolen. That's an amount that we simply do not have."

"Is it true the nobles of the Chiral Plains used taboo magic in the theft?"

That question was finally enough to dull King George's rage, albeit only slightly.

"Father claimed so in a speech before his execution, but that was the first I'd heard of it, and I hardly trust an admission made with a noose around his neck and demons on either side, ready to report whether the terms of the surrender were fulfilled. More likely, it's just an excuse by the demons for their invasion, made up after the fact to justify their land grab."

"Are the demons sticking to the terms? Are they withdrawing?" asked Christine.

"Yes. The siege on Port Hope has been lifted, and we've reestablished communication with the captured northern settlements. The situation up there is dire, but not as bad as it could have been; the demons did nothing to interrupt our farming or the delivery of food from the farms to the captured settlements. Nor did they interrupt slayer activities."

"Then by your leave, we should prepare for a tour of the local farms," said Christine.

"Not just yet," said King George, the corners of his mouth edging up into a vindictive smirk. "I have one more matter to deal with first. Both you and Wendy have made a number of spectacular failures that I would *love* to address."

Chapter 31: Expulsion

"Failures, Your Majesty?" asked Wendy, looking equal parts confused and nervous.

"Indeed. Was it not your careless use of Magiae Visus in front of Thomas that led to him learning it, and thus discovering things you were ordered to keep hidden? And was it not your carelessness, Christine, that permitted him to use Magiae Visus right in front of you, undiscovered? Had you not made such mistakes, would Thomas not be battling demons right now? My family would still be whole, and the kingdom would not have suffered such an ignoble defeat."

"The heck?!" I complained. "You're seriously going to accuse them of failing to lie to me *in front of me*?"

"Please remain silent," requested Christine. "He is not wrong. What restitution may we offer, my king?"

"*Everything*," snapped back the king. "I strip you of your positions, your titles, and your nobility. No longer do you have a place in the castle."

"B-But..." stammered Wendy. "What of our duties protecting and teaching Thomas?"

"You may still carry them out. Or rather, you *must*. I turn you both over to his custody. From now on, he owns you. I would love for you to share the fate of my sister, but alas, we don't have the time to spare for your acclimatization right now. I'll be sure to arrange it for after harvest."

Christine instantly paled. "Thomas *lives* in the castle," she pointed out in a rather strained voice.

"Not anymore. My father promised him more appropriate accommodation, and I am happy to follow through. From today until such a time as the gods see fit to return him to his own world, he has use of a residence in the upper district. His maid is there already, preparing the place, although given your early return, it's

unlikely she's done cleaning. Certainly your personal belongings won't be delivered until tomorrow. My apologies, but you'll need to make do. I'm sure it will still be more comfortable than sleeping outdoors."

At Christine's request, I held my tongue, but the gross injustice of his behavior made me want to scream. He was punishing them for failing to mislead me into killing demons? He blamed them for Stephanie, Edward, and Janna?

Maybe... But the way he kept glancing back at me made it obvious that wasn't the point. He blamed *me* as much as them. Christine and Wendy had, from a certain viewpoint, failed in their tasks. He was within his rights to punish them. Meanwhile, I had brought hope to the continent by providing a method of cleaning up miasma. He was duty bound to reward me. And so he gave me a house. A reward on the face of it, but in practice, he got to kick me out of the castle and avoid ever needing to deal with me again. It stripped me of my protection, not to mention Mary's. It meant the castle would no longer be responsible for my food. I very much doubted that fresh robes or hot water would continue to appear from nowhere. We no longer had access to training supplies or mana potions. What looked like a reward from the outside was actually an enormous inconvenience to us.

On top of that, he gave me *people*, treating them as property, gleefully informing them of a future in which their minds would be torn apart and overwritten. Again, an outside observer would view it as rewarding me, but he knew full well I didn't think that way.

He was hurting the pair of them to punish *me*.

"Now, get out of my sight. I'm sure one of my aides knows the address and can provide details of the salary Thomas will receive. I never want to see any of you three again."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Christine, doing a remarkable job of keeping her voice level.

Wendy didn't even try, keeping her mouth firmly shut.

"I wonder what your sister would think about you throwing away your position like this, after her efforts to get you into the academy?" called the king as we walked away.

Christine suddenly wasn't there.

A loud clang sounded behind me, and I spun to see Christine in front of the throne, sword drawn, swinging at the new king. He was laughing, and a pair of knights in front of him had intercepted Christine's attack, trapping her sword between their own. I hadn't seen them in the room thus far, so they must have been hiding somewhere, and the speed with which they'd moved to defend the king showed a talent that almost certainly exceeded Christine's.

"Aww, did I touch a nerve?" needled the king.

"Christine!" shouted Wendy. "Don't let him provoke you!"

"I acknowledge my failure and will accept my punishment for it, but you will *not* insult my sister," growled Christine, ignoring Wendy. Her arm shook, obviously trying to force her sword downward with all of her strength, but the knights didn't move an inch.

"I don't believe I did. I merely asked what she would think."

"Christine!" repeated Wendy.

Christine hesitated a moment more, but then released her pressure, blurring back to her position next to us.

"Let's get out of here," she said, while the new king continued chuckling, pleased with his petty revenge.

"I have to say, that was an abrupt end to our campaign. I might even describe it as anticlimactic."

Fang Zorzomon looked up from the report he was reading, happy for the distraction. The carriage he was riding in didn't have the best suspension, and trying to read the hastily scrawled text was making him travel-sick. "You say that as if it's a bad thing," he responded.

"No, it's not a bad thing," sighed Thazremath. "I'm just a little surprised. If their king was prepared to off himself, why didn't he do so ages ago?"

"He was a clever and pragmatic man. He did what he believed to be best for his kingdom, as he has always done. Two days ago, offering his head would not have helped his kingdom's situation. If anything, it would have only added to the instability. However, now that they've confirmed the power of their hero, his successor has a clear path to solving the food crisis, so it was safe to trade himself

for an end to the war."

"*Clever?* The man was a fool!"

"No, he simply lacked information. At every single step, his knowledge was lacking. He did not discover the crimes of his nobles before we did. Then he made the decision to cover up those crimes, believing that we would not go as far as war to avenge ourselves. Had he had earlier knowledge of this Miraculum spell the hero is capable of, he would have surrendered much earlier, before we discovered the knowledge for ourselves and increased our demands."

"I'd still say thinking we wouldn't take steps to enforce the ban on taboo magic shows he's pretty dull."

"Really? Then maybe these will change your mind."

Zorzomon tossed a pair of documents at his adjutant, who quickly scanned the titles.

"The report from Toby confirming the presence of a hero, and the past few days of intelligence from our scrying division about Ricousian's troop movements? What do they have to do with each other?"

"We have a long carriage ride. Read them for yourself."

"I already have. Toby listed the names and estimated abilities of everyone in the party, stated with very high confidence that the platoon dispatched to support his operation vastly outmatched them, and strongly recommended an operation to extract the hero and his human handlers from the rest of the group. And the troop movements are just that. Reports of troops moving around. Nothing interesting about them."

"Yes, there is. The movement of several platoons west from Fort Terrusarn."

"Okay, yes, that was a little odd, but they could have been on a training exercise, or on their way to defeat a monster that the local slayers couldn't take care of. Heck, it could have just been misdirection. It's hardly the first time they've made inexplicable troop movements."

"Yes, that's all true. It *could* have been nothing more than a coincidence."

"But obviously you think it wasn't."

"Had I not denied Toby's request to retrieve the hero, what route would they have taken to bring him back to us?"

"North, swinging west to avoid Odimere, past...Fort Terrusarn..."

"Now you're getting it."

"They'd have been perfectly placed to intercept our infiltration squad... So they sent their hero out with such a weak guard *hoping* we'd kidnap him, purely so that they could rescue him again later?!"

"That's my theory, yes. There's no way they didn't know our spies picked up that first cast of Miraculum, or that we'd see the slayer's guild notice and put two and two together. This is just conjecture, but I believe at that point, King Edward didn't actually believe it was possible to reclaim land with Miraculum. It's certainly true that the first cast didn't reduce miasma contamination around the capital. Perhaps he thought it needed a target more specific than 'the land,' or that the area of effect would be unfeasibly small. So instead of trusting in the spell's success, he put out a call for slayers, and made the subsequent offer of conditional surrender, to make *us* think it was effective. He turned the hero into bait, and if we'd taken it... Toby recommended capturing the two handlers that were with him alive, and perhaps the one called Wendy would have let herself be captured, but the one called Christine would not. She would have fought to the death, and the hero would have resented us for it. It was the last gambit of King Edward: an attempt to turn the hero against us and then rescue him before we could show him any evidence of the humans' crimes. And if by strange chance the land reclamation worked, well, he won either way."

"He's dead," said Thazremath after a pause. "That's not winning. That's the *opposite* of winning."

"If you believe that, then you have mistaken his goal. I consider today his victory, even if I did take a small consolation prize. I don't know whether the monster hordes were part of Edward's plan or if they were attracted by Miraculum, but either way, they allowed us to 'prove' that we were friendly toward the hero. We weren't able to obtain him for ourselves, but we were able to sow the first seeds of trust."

"Then presumably you have some plan for what to do next too? Seeds or not, the humans still have him. He's not going to get up and leave on his own, and taking him by force would breach the peace agreement. We'd risk the elves and dwarves siding with the humans."

"You might be surprised. If you considered Edward stupid, I dread to imagine what you'll think of his son. The man is intelligent, for sure, but there are some important attributes for a ruler which he decidedly lacks."

Zorzomon dug around in the piles of paper and handed Thazremath a third report.

"A dossier on Prince George?" read Thazremath. "Well, King George now, I suppose."

He spent the next ten minutes skimming the text before handing it back with a shake of his head. "So that's why you demanded Janna's corpse, but not the bodies of the others involved in the cover-up. Just how many moves ahead are you planning?"

"Hey, it's not *just* me. Fang I may be, but I'm not the ruler of Ti'zharr. But yes. With luck, the new King George is going to do something that we will *both* agree is stupid, and thanks to Toby's report, we were able to assign the perfect person to take advantage once he slips up."

Thazremath considered the situation for a few minutes more.

"I am never, *ever* going in for promotion," he declared.

Chapter 32: Treason

"Do you want to run away?" I asked as we followed directions in an attempt to find our new home. The aide who had supplied us with them had also given me a small bag of gold coins, which cheered me up somewhat. Fantasy money! I almost wanted to squee again.

Christine or Wendy hadn't thought much of it, though, so it probably wasn't a lot despite the gold coloring of the coins.

"Pardon?" asked Wendy.

"Run away. It's a simple concept. We could leave Odimere. Leave *Ricousian*. We could go visit the elves or dwarves. I'm sure they'd love to host us, and we'd have the advantage that their leaders don't hate our guts."

"I will not betray my kingdom," Christine stated flatly, ever the loyal dog.

"Even when your king has explicitly expressed a desire to use not-legally-mind-control on you?"

Wendy snorted.

"I'm glad you think it's funny, but no, not even then," said Christine.

"It won't happen," said Wendy, waving a hand at Christine dismissively. "By the time harvest is over, the idiot will hopefully have mellowed out a bit. Even if he hasn't, I can't imagine Thomas allowing it. And if it somehow does happen despite Thomas's wishes, I have full trust in him not to take advantage, and at least two-thirds trust that he'll attempt to reverse it at the first available opportunity."

"Only two-thirds?" I asked.

"Mary's obviously still not quite right, and you haven't done much about it."

"I did try, actually. She told me quite clearly and explicitly to not pick at scabs."

"Oh? Weird, but in that case, I'll upgrade you to four-fifths. I wouldn't actually mind going through it, as long as I knew I was safe and that it would be magicked away afterward. It would be an interesting experience."

"You're taking this remarkably well."

Wendy shrugged. "His Grumpy Highness can strip me of my family name and demote me to commoner or slave, but he can't order my family to stop caring about me. He can fire me from my position of court mage, but I took up that position with the intent of solving the miasma problem, and there is no better place to do that than remaining by your side. I'm not attached to noble luxuries. Mostly. I *am* going to complain about loss of access to the castle baths. Your new house better have one, or else we're building one."

"What about you, Christine?" I asked, but I got no answer.

Wendy might not care, but Christine was taking it far worse, and the king had taken obvious glee in rubbing salt in the wound. Frankly, while I much appreciated having Wendy around, Christine was something of a liability. She had tried to murder Mary because the previous king told her to. The new king blamed me for the loss of his family. He couldn't *publicly* do anything to me, but if he ordered Christine to carry out unofficial acts of revenge, there was a horrible possibility that she would. If she was going to stay with me, breaking her loyalty was a must.

The fact that she'd just tried to murder King George was a damn good start... Her loyalty was to the kingdom, not the king.

"Well, here we are," declared Wendy, stopping in front of a huge, two-story wooden structure. It wasn't quite a mansion, but the window count made it clear it was more than a simple family home.

"Doesn't look like he skimped on accommodation," I observed. The place was far too large for four people.

"Don't count your chickens yet. There must be a reason it was empty and available at one day's notice."

"There is," said Christine. "It belonged to the Scarthchild family."

"The who? I've never heard of them."

"I suppose you wouldn't have, but I served under Graham Scarthchild for a while. His latest posting was as a captain, serving in

Fort Mertti. His wife was an army healer, also serving in Fort Mertti. Their eldest son was a soldier there. I don't know if they had any other children, but if so, it's unlikely they'd be able to maintain this place."

So, the previous owners were dead. I wasn't sure if that was better or worse than some of the alternatives I'd been imagining.

"*We* can't maintain this place with the pittance that miser gave us," complained Wendy.

"You're going to need to teach me the value of your coins," I said as I pushed open the front door. "Hello? Mary?"

"Master?!" came a shout from upstairs, followed by a clatter and hurried footsteps. Her face appeared from around a corner, staring at us with wide eyes. "You aren't supposed to be back until tomorrow!"

A tension I hadn't even noticed relaxed as I saw her safe and well. If King George really wanted to mess with me, there would have been no better target for him than her. Thankfully, angry as he was, he apparently still had enough self-awareness to not kick *that* hornet's nest.

I did note she was out of her posh uniform and back in an old, lower-quality one, though. Again, that was perfectly understandable; the other had been the *castle's* uniform, after all. Nevertheless, the whole thing still felt petty.

"Hug," I demanded.

"But I'm all dirty."

"Don't care. Hug," I repeated. I'd been wearing my robe for two days straight, most of which had been spent traveling along dusty roads. It wasn't as if I were clean myself. Heck, I'd been wearing the same *underwear* for two days straight. I agreed wholeheartedly with Wendy's thoughts on baths.

Mary shrugged and complied.

"What?" I asked in response to Wendy's judgmental gaze.

"Nothing. I just thought you were acting out of character. You don't generally do touchy-feely."

"Hey, this is the longest we've been separated since my arrival."

"Yeah, less than a week ago."

"It still counts! Besides, Mary's hugs are good for stress relief, and I'm damn stressed."

"Language!" complained Mary.

"Oh? So this *isn't* the first time?"

"The second dragon dream."

"Ah," said Wendy, then sniggered.

"What? What's funny about that?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking something inappropriate again."

I peered at Wendy suspiciously, failing to see what was inappropriate about chasing nightmares away with a hug.

"Fine, if you must know, it's that the combination of 'stress relief' and 'maid' generally has a very different meaning. You are just so darn...*pure*. Or maybe gay. One of the two."

"No, I'm not gay," I sighed, causing Wendy to snort with stifled laughter again. "What now?"

"Oh, I was just imagining the 'harem' Dennis might have suggested for a gay hero, and which prince would have been sacrificed for the cause. Don't mind me; I wouldn't want to taint our pure hero with my wicked ways."

"Look, I'm not some sort of celibate monk. Firstly, I already have someone back in my world. Secondly, I just don't do casual sex. Like you said, I've been here less than a week. That's not enough time to *really* get to know someone. Besides, we've got one person here who lied to me and misled me, one who not only lied but also tried to murder Mary, and then we have Mary herself, who's in a situation where it's not possible for her to give informed consent."

"She gave that at the point she sold herself," said Christine. "It was no secret what was likely to happen afterward."

"No. Given her family situation, that was coerced. That's not consent either."

"Hey, Mary? Are you okay?" asked Wendy, reminding me that the maid was still clinging to me, her face buried in my chest. Her whole body was shaking slightly, not enough for me to feel through the thick robes, but enough that Wendy had obviously spotted it.

"Of course!" beamed Mary, unburying herself and looking up, the shaking turning off like a switch had been flipped. "I should get back

to work! I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow, so I haven't finished preparing the bedrooms."

"I'm sure we can all prepare our own rooms," I said, rubbing her head. "Is there a bath? I think that's what we'd all like most."

"There is, but the fire and water crystals have been removed. And you can't prepare your rooms! That's *my* job!"

"You have more than enough work to be getting on with. Get the bath clean, and I'll fill it and heat it with magic."

Mary pouted at having her work stolen, but she ran off to carry out her orders regardless.

"Well, I'm no psychiatrist, but given the way she reacted to Christine's comment just now, I think we can make a reasonable guess what her problem is," said Wendy.

"Huh?"

"Oh, sheesh. And you claim not to be a celibate monk... Remember that Dennis had her for a month or so *before* handing her to you."

"Oh..." The answer was obvious when she pointed it out like that. "You think he raped her..."

"It's not...technically..." started Christine, but this time her heart wasn't in it, and she didn't even finish articulating her defense.

To the enslaved Mary, it would doubtless be a positive memory. She'd fulfilled her duty, doing what her master wanted and making him happy. She certainly would have been pleased about it at the time and participated completely willingly. But if her mind was restored... She'd remember a man who was probably forty years her senior taking advantage of her shattered personality, making her do something her free mind would never have willingly done. Could she cope with that, or would it break her?

Or had it broken her already, leaving her in her current state?

Once again, I tasted bile. Letting the demons wipe the humans off the map wasn't a solution; that would harm the victims of the world as badly as the offenders. But there had to be *something*.

"Not legally rape in exactly the same way as the collars are not legally mind control," I sighed.

"Do you want to change it?" asked Wendy.

"And how is he supposed to do that?" snapped Christine. "Free every slave he can find? Burn down the slave markets? Murder the slavers? Are you *trying* to give King George an excuse?"

"Oh, no. I'm suggesting nothing of the sort," said Wendy, grinning evilly. "I'm suggesting something *even worse*."

"Huh? And what's that?" I asked.

"Well, this is just a random question, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the previous conversation, but...how would you like to be king?"

Christine's hand edged toward the hilt of her sword. Wendy ignored her, staring at me intently.

"I can't. Assuming Christine was going all out against Toby this morning, I could probably win against her, but it would be close. I couldn't win against two of her, and those guards that sprang up in the throne room were stronger than her. I certainly couldn't fight an army."

"Today, no. But tomorrow? A week from now? A month? Your mana may not be growing as fast as the first few days, but so what? It 'merely' doubled instead of increasing by an order of magnitude. Keep training. By the time we're done purifying the farmland nearby, I'm certain you could fight an army. That was the entire reason for summoning you! If you couldn't fight the demon armies, what point would there have been?"

"Wendy..." growled Christine, but I noted her hand still wasn't touching the hilt.

"It was just a random question. She said so herself," I pointed out. "We could ask random questions all day without meaning anything by it. For example, is George a good king? Will his reign be good for the kingdom?"

Christine twitched.

"He certainly seemed to have a plan for ensuring a stable food supply, but I wonder who actually came up with it," I continued. "A king who throws away one of his most promising knights for a reason that was beyond her control... That seemed a poor decision to me."

"No... I should have questioned Mary about the spell that was

cast. To not do so was a serious error on my part."

"A simple mistake, then. No one is perfect."

"He literally only took over today. It's far too soon to tell what sort of king he will be."

"That's true. He certainly deserves a chance."

Christine's hand edged away from her sword.

"Are you...? Are you serious?" she asked.

"I'm certainly giving Wendy's random question a fair amount of consideration. I know I was summoned to protect the kingdom, but I'd much rather protect the kingdom's people. *All* of them. King George has not, thus far, given the impression that he considers those two goals synonymous."

Christine slumped, her arms falling limp.

"Please..." she said, in a voice so small I could barely hear her. "If you do this... Please, save my sister..."

And suddenly, the bee she kept in her bonnet about Mary's sacrifice—and how quickly she was driven to anger at anyone who belittled it—made so much more sense.

Chapter 33: Dreams

"Grysuurm. Hymern."

I opened my eyes but, as expected, didn't see very much. The dark fog swirling all around me made sure of that. I stooped and picked up a handful of ash, letting it fall between my fingers while I waited for what I knew was coming.

"Glyciir ga fo drivern."

And there it was. While the memory of the miasma poisoning and flame breath from last time had withered away to almost nothing minutes after waking, now that I was back, I could remember it all perfectly. The agony of being burnt alive and the utter hopelessness of trying to do anything about it.

Preferring there not to be a second time, I slunk off in the opposite direction to the voice.

Great booming laughter started up behind me.

"Valaruun. Kloi ka vita. Bylistrii. List ka thruuk."

"What did it say?"

I blinked at the sudden discontinuity. Why was there English in this dream?

"Focus on me. Repeat back exactly what it said."

"Valaruun. Kloi ka vita. Bylistrii. List ka thruuk," I repeated.

"Is that all?"

"I..." I started, wondering when I'd fallen over and where the fog had gone. "Huh?"

It took a few more blinks to realize I'd woken up for real. No light shone through the windows, so it must have still been night, but Wendy was in my room, scribbling on some paper.

"Is there anything else you remember?" she asked. "Hurry, before it fades."

"Why are you in my room?" I groggily asked.

"There's no time for that! Focus on the dream before it fades

again."

"I tried to run away from the dragon. It laughed at me, then started talking, then you woke me up."

"Hmm..." said Wendy.

"What's going on?" asked Christine, entering too.

"Mmm... Did you dream again?" asked Mary, appearing in her nightie, rubbing her eyes.

"What's going on is that our hero had a nocturnal visitor," explained Wendy. "I'm glad I had the foresight to set up some detection spells, because they picked up telepathic communications. It's some sort of dream walker."

"What?" I asked, pushing myself upright. "Uh... Wendy, why are you naked?"

"Because I got kicked out of the castle without my belongings, nightclothes included. But stop getting distracted. I'm telling you that someone was invading your dreams."

"That dragon was *real*?!"

"Well, I wouldn't go *that* far. There's a conscious individual involved, but they could appear in your dreams in whatever form they wished."

"It certainly *looked* like a dragon," I mumbled. "Not to mention *felt*."

"Historically, when dragons have been active, they've been, well, *obvious*," said Christine. "They don't skulk around talking to people in dreams. They invade kingdoms and burn things."

I glanced over at Christine, who was equally naked, presumably for the same reason. "Dragon or not, there are two problems. First, why? What's the purpose of invading my dreams and spouting incomprehensible gobbledygook at me? Second, how did they know? I had this dream on my first night, at which point the number of people who knew I'd been summoned should have been *very* tightly controlled."

"Trying to scare you off?" suggested Wendy.

"Maybe they expected to be understood, but your divine blessing doesn't work properly in the dream?" suggested Mary.

"Either way, we have something concrete now," said Wendy,

holding up her sheet of paper. “We need to find a linguist to take a look at this. It’s certainly not a language I recognize.”

Christine and Mary peered over her shoulder. “Me neither,” agreed Christine.

“It’ll need to wait for the morning, and it’s going to be a pain not having access to the castle’s resources,” sighed Wendy. “For now, there’s a decision to make. I can block the communications, but do we want to? Whoever is contacting Thomas appears to be antagonistic, but further communications could provide us with further information.”

“If they return, could you trace them?” asked Christine.

“No.”

“Then block them. Given his difficulties in remembering concrete information from the dreams, they’re too unreliable to use as an information source.”

Wendy nodded and then spent a few minutes doing complicated mana stuff around my bedroom, while I did my best to ignore the fact that she was still naked.

“Do you need a hug?” asked Mary.

“No thanks. Wendy woke me up before it got scary.”

Mary did one of her cute pouts of disappointment.

“Fine. Go on, then,” I said, caving.

Given that I was still in bed, the response was more of a cuddle than a hug.

I had a distinct impression that with every day here, my standards were slipping further. Despite my best efforts, I’d somehow ended up with three girls in my room, two of whom were naked, while the third was cuddling me in my bed. Was this some part of the divine blessing of the hero? They all ended up with harems not because they were scumbags, but because the gods decreed it? Or was this due to further machinations of Dennis, somehow?

At least Mary hadn’t tried to wash me when I’d taken a bath before bed, even if it had been kinda lonely going in by myself after the three girls had taken theirs together.

Bah. There was nothing wrong with a spot of wholesome

cuddling. And of course it was common courtesy to close my eyes while Wendy worked; it wasn't her fault she'd been tossed out of the castle with no nightclothes.

That all made perfect sense. What made less sense was the way that, when I opened my eyes again, my room was brightly lit.

"Good morning, Master," said Mary. "Could you please release me? I need to prepare breakfast and your clothing for the day."

"Uh... Did I, um, fall asleep...?"

"Yup! You slept soundly all night!"

I wordlessly released her, and she hopped out of my bed and skipped happily out of my room.

Wendy was never going to let me forget this. Maybe it would be possible to avoid her for the entire day? And the next, and the rest of the week, and probably the year too.

By the time I made it to the breakfast table, where Christine was staring at a bowl of thin porridge as if she weren't quite sure what to do with it, I thought the red tides of embarrassment had faded somewhat. Alas, all it took was a single smirk from Wendy to precipitate another wave of blushing.

"I was right yesterday," she declared. "You are *impossibly* pure. If only it was possible to fertilize crops with wholesomeness, you could single-handedly feed a nation."

"I was tired," I countered.

"What outfit is that?" asked Christine, her subject change instantly scoring her a ton of points in my book, despite it having all the subtlety of the sun on a cloudless midday. "I don't recognize it."

"No idea. I just put on what Mary gave me."

"I was given a small allowance for food and necessities yesterday," answered Mary, who was eating her porridge far more happily. "Since Master had no clothes of his own, I spent a few coins on him."

"And what about yourself? I note the uniform you're wearing has a dirty mark in exactly the same spot as yesterday's."

"Ah... They only let me keep the one," she answered.

"Think of yourself too," I ordered. "Get yourself some clothes next time."

"There wasn't enough money. And even had there been more, I'd have spent it on food. I was only able to get enough to last until tomorrow."

"We need to deal with the money situation," sighed Wendy. "It's obvious the new king doesn't intend to pay Thomas enough for basic necessities. We'll need to compensate somehow. I'd suggest making a Miraculum staff and selling it to the demons, but with our current resources, we can't get the raw materials we need."

"Is it really that bad? How much is this worth?" I asked, dropping the previous day's bag of gold coins on the table.

"It'll feed the four of us for a week. Maybe two if we eat nothing but this gloop," answered Christine.

"Wow. That's counterintuitive," I complained. The coins were gold, for goodness' sake! Or at least gold *colored*. Perhaps gold was just cheap here.

"I would suggest signing up as slayers, but we'll be unable to devote the time it would require," said Christine.

"I bet the demons would pay up front if you offered them that staff. Or the dwarves or elves," I pointed out.

"True," agreed Wendy. "That's probably the best option, since it's something we want to do anyway."

"The fact we're having this conversation at all is ridiculous," I complained. "What the hell is King George thinking? It's not like we literally murdered his parents."

If anyone else had thoughts about the king's thought processes, I didn't get to hear them on account of a knock at the front door. Mary hopped down from the table to open it.

"Were we expecting anyone?" asked Wendy.

"Who knows?" answered Christine. "King George didn't see fit to give us more than the broadest outline of the plan last night. He mentioned having the effects of Miraculum checked and that he'd have Thomas circle the local area, but he didn't say whether he'll send someone to give us the results. Common sense would dictate he will, but it's equally possible he won't send anyone, hoping we will simply wait here for a liaison who will never come, so that he can charge us with dereliction of duty."

Mary opened the front door and screamed.

Christine vanished, reappearing at the front door with sword in hand. She hadn't had it at the table, but she struck me as the sort of person who would know where her weapons were at all times. I'd bet she stashed it somewhere easily accessible.

Much to my regret, I was a few steps behind. I might have declared myself stronger than Christine, but she still had me beat in a few areas, one of which was the ability to react to something like a scream without having to think about it. By the time I'd worked my way through the chain of logic "Mary opened the door and screamed, therefore she must have seen something threatening outside, therefore she is in danger, therefore I should protect her," Christine was already halfway there.

Another scream sounded from outside the front door, followed by a thump.

I arrived to find a young catgirl sitting on her bum. "Ow!" she complained. "What's with that greeting, nya?! Weren't you expecting me, nya?"

"No," curtly answered Christine. "Who are you?"

"Minoru, nya! The white mage that was to be assigned to the hero as part of the peace treaty, nya!"

"What part of the peace treaty is that?" asked Christine.

"And why do you keep saying 'nya'?" asked Wendy, who'd wandered over to join us.

"The late King Edward promised to share the Miraculum spell with us, nya!"

"That's the first we're hearing about this," said Christine, eyes narrowing.

"Hmm... But not telling us does sound like the sort of petty thing King George would do," countered Wendy.

"I've got an official writ of passage, nya!" exclaimed Minoru, pulling out a bit of parchment and handing it over to Christine. That she was carrying something of the sort was no surprise; it had only been one day since the war ended. It was far too soon for a demon to be wandering around the humans' capital.

And I still wasn't sure about the term "demon." She was blatantly

a catgirl! She looked almost human, about Mary's age and dressed in a white, sleeveless dress that seemed slightly too short for her. The deep red of her lips and smoothness of her skin could have been a natural advantage her species had, or she could be the first person I'd seen wearing makeup.

Or maybe not... Had the queen been wearing any when I'd barged into the throne room? It was possible, but my mind had been elsewhere at the time.

Makeup or not, the real differences started with her shoulder-length hair, which was an unnatural bright pink. Unlike Wendy's, there were no visible roots, suggesting it was her natural color. An equally pink fluffy tail poked out behind her from beneath her dress, and a pair of cat ears atop her head twitched almost constantly.

"What are you looking at, nya?" she asked, catching me staring at her ears and smiling coyly. "Do you want to pet them, nya?"

I felt another blush launching itself upward, on track to smash into my face in mere seconds.

"If you're trying to seduce him, don't bother," sighed Wendy. "He's the most wholesome hero in all of recorded history."

"Huh?" went Minoru, briefly looking confused, before switching her expression to a pout. "I'm not, nya! I'm just being friendly, nya!"

"Really? In that case, he probably *does* want to pet you, but in a completely platonic and innocent way."

"I'm quite capable of answering for myself, you know," I pointed out, having spent the previous exchange wondering what the heck was happening and coming up with two theories, both rather horrifying in their own ways. "Minoru, no offense, but aren't you're a little young for this job? Given the amount of mana required by Miraculum, wouldn't a more experienced mage be better? Or is there perhaps another reason why *you* were chosen?"

"I know I can't cast it, nya! I'm just going to learn it, then teach it to everyone else back home, nya!"

That was reasonable. I still didn't have a great grip on how much mana the average mage could wield, but I guessed there were very few people around who could cast Miraculum. Maybe there weren't *any*. But there still might be value in sending someone more

experienced over to learn it.

"Were you assigned to this mission based on something Wendy said that Toby overheard, by any chance?" I asked, getting the least horrifying of my two theories out of the way first.

Minoru's look of uncertainty was enough to tell me my guess was correct.

Wendy snorted with laughter. "Seriously? He actually fell for that? Thomas just wanted to talk to me in private to discuss something that would have blown his disguise. Of course, the simple fact that he was asking was enough to spoil his cover, so I covered it up with the first thing that came to mind by implying he wanted to hump me."

The look of uncertainty grew.

"Why was that the first thing that came to mind?" I muttered.

"Look," continued Wendy, ignoring me. "If you want my advice, don't try to lie to him, mislead him, or tempt him. I can tell you from experience that it doesn't work and has a tendency to backfire spectacularly. Just be open, honest, and friendly, and as long as you're a generally nice person, you'll win him over in no time."

"Do you have to talk about me like I'm not here?" I complained, following up with a confused "Huh?" when Minoru grabbed my hand, placed it on her head, and started rubbing, all while staring intently at my face.



Then her gaze moved down, carefully examining my crotch.

"Uh..." I said, not quite sure what was happening.

"Told you," Wendy remarked snidely.

Minoru sighed, releasing my hand. "Thank goodness," she declared. "I can stop doing that utterly ridiculous nya thing."

Chapter 34: Visitors

"This writ is legitimate," declared Christine after a careful examination. "It's signed and stamped by the late King Edward."

"Shall I prepare a room, if Miss Minoru is going to be staying?" asked Mary uncertainly.

"I'm, um, not sure if I am," admitted Minoru without going "nya" once. "I was expecting to meet you at the castle but got directed here instead."

"Yeah, we got kicked out," Wendy said with a shrug. "The new king doesn't like us much."

Minoru opened her mouth as if to say something, then paused and shrugged. "Open and honest, huh? Fine, then. Yes, I was told King George was likely to blame Thomas for the death of his parents, and that I should watch out for him doing anything stupid I could take advantage of. I can't say I was expecting him to start mistreating you *before* you fixed Ricousian's farmland, though."

"Take advantage? Just why are you here, exactly?" asked Christine suspiciously.

"Exactly why I said," said the catgirl, shrugging again. "I was given four orders. In order of priority, the first was to do nothing to antagonize Thomas or make him believe the Ti'zharr Empire posed a threat to him or his harem. Second, to learn Miraculum and find a way to apply it to our lands. Third, to build a personal relationship with Thomas and his harem, and to do what I can to ensure they're favorably disposed to demons. Fourth, to encourage them to move to Ti'zharr."

"Why do you keep saying 'harem'?" asked Mary, tilting her head in confusion. "You mean us?"

"There seems to have been a misunderstanding somewhere, but Thomas does appear to be the only male living here with three young girls who are all—if you'll forgive me for being a little coarse—

conventionally beautiful. I can see why our informants might have gotten the wrong impression."

"Should you really be saying all this?" I asked. "Won't you get into trouble?"

"See, what did I say?" smirked Wendy. "A bit of honesty, and you've got him worried about you already. I swear, if only King Edward knew his personality beforehand, he'd have had him wrapped around his little finger."

"Uh... I'm not *that* odd, am I?"

"A minute ago, she was trying to seduce you, and now you're empathizing with her! Of *course* you're odd," complained Wendy, before turning back to Minoru. "What *was* with that nya thing, anyway? And if you intended to seduce him, does that mean we need to worry about, uh, *that*?"

"No, you don't need to worry about 'that,'" replied Minoru somewhat bitterly, but she didn't explain what the heck "that" was. "And our records of previously summoned heroes show they often pick up young female demons with catlike features, but then complain they aren't talking properly if they don't end every sentence with 'nya.' None of the records explain what 'nya' means, beyond that it's a noise that cats are supposed to make."

"But you're a demon, not a cat," Mary pointed out.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure that's not a noise I've ever heard a cat make," added Wendy.

"Maybe there's some translation shenanigans going on?" I suggested, not wanting to even try explaining *that* subject. Given the sort of previous heroes they'd apparently had, it was starting to become very obvious why their attempts to control me had been so misguided. "And what's the 'that' you were talking about?"

"Nothing you need to worry your innocent little head about," giggled Wendy.

"You're aware Toby had his more obvious demonic features surgically removed and cursed to prevent healing?" asked Minoru, being slightly more helpful. "Let's just say that I've been through a similar procedure. I'd rather not talk about the details."

"I still don't get it," said Wendy. "How does saying 'nya' all the

time result in Thomas moving to Ti'zharr?"

"I present myself to the hero as cute and defenseless, then I say I'm returning on my own to Ti'zharr to spread the spell; the hero feels worried about me and offers to escort me on my journey, then he sees how much better Ti'zharr is and stays there."

"That... It's actually going to work, isn't it?" whined Wendy. "You have literally just *told* us your plan, and it's *still* going to work. Maybe not that last bit, but if you try going home alone, I can totally see Thomas insisting on escorting you. Never mind the fact that you turned up here alone in the first place. No, he won't care about that at all."

"I'm not sure if you're complaining about me or not," I muttered.

"I don't know either!"

"Anyway, would you like breakfast, Miss Minoru?" asked Mary. "I'm sorry for screaming earlier. I was frightened at seeing a demon."

"Well, aren't you a polite little thing?" replied the demon, petting her. "I forgive you, and I'd love some, please."

"Don't get too excited. It's just gruel," said Wendy.

"Wow. Just how much does the king hate you? In the spirit of fulfilling my orders, I should point out that if you chose to stay in Ti'zharr, you would certainly get better food."

Despite her complaint, Minoru dug into the bowl with every sign of enjoyment.

"So... We're simply welcoming a demon into our house? And no one has a problem with this?" asked Christine.

"I know I keep mentioning it, but I'm already sharing a house with someone who tried to murder Mary," I pointed out.

Christine frowned, not having a great comeback prepared. I could see her point, though; she was worried about our safety. However, before we could debate the subject, there was once again a knock at the door.

"Let me answer it," said Christine when Mary began moving again. "Wendy, you should add some magical protection to this place."

"I'd love to, if only we could afford the materials I'd need."

"Wait. The king hasn't even given you *money*?" asked a disbelieving Minoru.

"Why do you think we're eating gruel?!"

"Wow. My job will be easier than I thought."

"Archbishop Alexander," greeted Christine from the doorway, bowing politely. "I fear we can't offer much in the way of hospitality, but please come in."

"Thank you, my daughter," came a croaky but still strong voice from outside. An elderly man stepped in, supporting himself on a cane and dressed in white vestments with yellow decoration. His status as a religious figure was cemented by the ridiculous hat he carried, almost a full third of his height, and which he'd needed to remove to fit through our doorway. He hobbled forward with a gait that suggested he already had one foot in the grave, but his focused expression and piercing eyes implied that he was going to fight the final step with everything he had. It was, alas, a fight that most of his hair had already lost, leaving him with a few white tufts that seemed as determined to cling to their owner as he was to cling to his life.

"Not literally," whispered Wendy in my ear, alerting me that I'd gone a little slack-jawed thinking of him as Christine's father. Given the age gap, great-grandfather would have been more realistic!

"To think I'd live to see this day," he said, gazing at me. "What a joyous occasion this is."

"How may we help you, Your Excellency?" asked Christine.

"Me? Not at all," he rasped, taking a seat on a chair that Mary smoothly pulled out for him. "I just felt like being a little selfish and laying eyes on the savior of the continent just once before I finally kick the bucket."

"I think it's a little premature to start calling me that," I commented.

"Perhaps. Perhaps," he laughed creakily. "But let an old man live in hope. I very much doubt I'll be around to see the continent restored and the curse of the dragons lifted, but I would like to believe the process has begun. Now..."

He stopped mid-sentence, leaving me a little concerned he'd died

right there and then, but thankfully he was still moving. He raised a shaking hand, pointing at a sheet of paper Wendy had left on the table.

"What is *that*?" he asked. "Why do you have it?"

"Do you recognize it?" asked Wendy. "Something made contact with Thomas in his dreams, and that's a transcription of some of what it said."

"In his *dreams*?" asked the archbishop, shuddering. "And just when I was feeling so optimistic too."

"What is it?"

"It's unusual to see it written in our script instead of its own angular markings, but phonetically, I have little doubt it's Infernal. It's the divine language of devils and fallen gods."

"If it's not of this world, that would explain why the blessing didn't work," said Wendy. "But in the dream, it was spoken by a dragon. I thought the dragons had their own language?"

"I know little of dragons, my child. You would need to seek a scholar more learned than I to answer that, but I do know a little of divine scripts. I'll need to consult some dusty old tomes to give a precise translation, but roughly... It starts with an expression of amusement, followed by a hope that someone will survive. The final part talks about something coming, but I'm not certain what. Infernal is an evil language, in which even the equivalent of 'good morning' reads as a threat, but given the phrasing here, I'd say this has the style of a hunter taunting its prey. A hunter finds its prey amusing, and hopes it will survive a little longer to face the hunt that is coming for it. Presumably the dragon is the hunter and Thomas the prey."

"Crap..." said Wendy.

Mary didn't even chastise her for her language.

"In the light of this, King George's behavior can no longer be called a mere annoyance. It's now a danger to the kingdom," declared Christine. "No longer can we say the threats to Thomas's life have ended. He requires protection, and we require proper resources to continue his training."

"I will talk to the king," offered Alexander. "He is grieving, and a

grieving child can be forgiven for lashing out."

"At the risk of repeating myself..." said Minoru. "Well, you know exactly what I want to say. But since I know you're going to ignore me..." She reached into her small pack and pulled out a jingling pouch, dropping it on the table with a thud. "Will this be enough to get the materials you need to defend this place?"

Wendy examined the contents. "It'll certainly let me set up some decent enchantments, but this place will never be a castle. Besides, Thomas is going to spend a lot of time traveling outside of Odimere."

"Then use it to get him armor and weapons. Or heck, just use it to get some decent grub. No one can fight properly with an empty belly."

"Thanks," I said, slightly suspicious. "Isn't that your money, though?"

"It's expenses for my mission, and I can't think of a more spectacular way to fail my mission than letting you get killed. Besides, it's not a gift. It's a loan. Once your king stops sulking, you can pay me back, and if you can't afford to, well, we'll just have to make alternative compensatory arrangements."

"Like me moving to Ti'zharr?" I guessed.

Minoru smirked. "Open and honest," she replied.

"If Archbishop Alexander is unable to talk sense into the king, we should seriously consider moving," said Christine, surprising me greatly. "But not this second. Whatever is coming, I doubt it will arrive overnight. The fact that a part of the text requests that Thomas survive until then implies that we have a significant length of time to prepare. We should do what we can here first. I assume you didn't only come here to look at Thomas, Your Excellency?"

"No, my excuse for coming was to play the role of messenger boy. I came to inform you that the priests and priestesses who are assigned to tour the local farms with you—and hopefully learn Miraculum—are ready and waiting in the cathedral. Please stop by and collect them when you depart."

"I see there is more that King George failed to inform us of," sighed Christine. "Very well. I shall travel with Thomas. We'll leave immediately. Wendy, make what use you can of Minoru's oh-so-

generous *loan*. Use your discretion on what would be most helpful, but I think the suggestion of weapons and armor is a good one. With the war over, you'll likely find some bargains. Mary, take some of the coins and purchase food and necessities."

Mary looked over at me for confirmation, no longer taking orders from Christine over me. "And remember that necessities includes stuff for you too," I told her. "Get yourself spare clothes. *Proper* clothes, not more uniforms."

"You realize you've never seen Christine in anything other than her armor either, right?" asked Wendy, but I ignored her on account of the way she was wrong. Or perhaps naked didn't count?

"And of course, I shall also be accompanying Thomas in order to learn Miraculum," said Minoru.

"I shall seek an audience with our king and see if I can talk him off the unfortunate path on which he has set himself," stated Alexander. "I shall also seek a more accurate translation of this text."

"Sounds like we have a plan," I agreed. "Let's go save the continent."

Chapter 35: Education

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said a priest in white robes that were surprisingly similar to Alexander's, except that the trimming and decoration were green instead of yellow. Also, his hat was somewhat more sensible, barely even a foot in height. "My name is Tony, and I'm the leader of our little group of students."

Behind him stood another priest with blue trimming and no hat at all, along with a trio of priestesses, one wearing green and the other two in blue. If I had to hazard a guess, the color of their trimming denoted rank within the church, rather than magical affinity. As far as I knew, a strong affinity for white magic was more or less a requirement to join the clergy in the first place.

By that logic, perhaps the primary color of their vestments denoted their affinity?

"Daniel," said the blue priest.

"Glenda," followed up the blue priestess next to him, who was holding his hand and looking rather nervous.

"Jane," said the next blue priestess.

"And I'm Bishop Johanna," finished the green priestess, the only one to introduce herself with a title.

I did my best to commit the names to memory, despite the distraction of the towering cathedral behind them. It was one of the few buildings in the city that was more than a couple of stories tall, a gleaming construction of white brick and beautiful stained glass. The gods and goddesses of this world appeared to be highly respected. Hopefully. The alternative was graft and corruption on a rather terrifying level. Given the free-healing-for-all initiative and the behavior of their archbishop, not to mention that the deities provably existed and, to paraphrase Wendy, weren't above being obvious about their existence, I was prepared to give the benefit of the doubt and assume the first option.

"I'm Thomas Smith," I said, introducing myself.

"Christine," said Christine, skipping her family name after her demotion.

"Minoru, nya!" exclaimed Minoru.

"You're nya-ing again," I pointed out.

"I'm trying to be disarmingly friendly, nya."

I could understand where she was coming from. From the way Glenda kept glancing at her, it was obvious that the demon was the cause of her nervousness. And while the others weren't outwardly nervous, that didn't mean they were comfortable.

"Why is there a demon with you?" demanded Johanna, putting voice to their concerns.

"Because it was part of the peace agreement," answered Christine.

"We're letting them keep tabs on our hero? Would they like to put a leash on him too?" she spat.

"I'm not *your* hero," I pointed out. "And she's here to learn Miraculum, the same as you."

The priestess gave me a look of obvious disapproval, but I ignored her. I had no intention of playing favorites.

"Please calm down," said Tony, a phrase which had approximately zero chance of actually calming anyone down, but it did at least send Johanna into a sullen silence. "Now, what are the plans?"

"We'll head about four miles north, where Thomas will explain and cast Miraculum," explained Christine. "Then we'll move east a few miles and you can attempt it. If you don't succeed after a few hours, Thomas will cast it, and either way, we'll return home."

"Sounds simple enough," said Tony.

"We're walking?" asked Jane. "That's four hours of travel time. I'm not certain I'm capable of that."

"King George has not seen fit to provide us with such niceties as carriages," grumbled Christine through gritted teeth. "I was hoping something had been prepared without our knowledge, but apparently that is not so. We can rest during the journey, and in the worst case, Thomas and I can carry one passenger each."

Given that body strengthening used mana, and there was no

reason *not* to want the ability to bench-press a cow with each arm, it surprised me how many mages hadn't learned it. Thankfully, Jane was the only one to express any concern, so the eight of us set off.

"I fail to see the problem," said King George. He was rather grumpy at having his schedule messed with when he was so busy, but an audience request from an archbishop wasn't something he could ignore.

"A threat has been made against the hero by an unknown being. We must act to protect him," repeated Archbishop Alexander.

"Yes, I heard your description the first time around. *You*, on the other hand, don't appear to comprehend *me*. I asked why you think this is a problem. Why *must* we protect him?"

Alexander frowned, having no idea what was running through the king's mind. "Because he holds the key to saving this world from the endlessly encroaching curse that afflicts it."

"That is true. However, that 'key' is nothing but a simple spell. Is he not teaching it to some of your church's most talented healers as we speak? You said the threat is not imminent, so he should not have a problem teaching the spell to others before it arrives. Once he has, what further purpose will he serve?"

Alexander's eyes opened wide as he realized the king understood the situation perfectly and simply *didn't care*. "We don't yet know if our healers can learn the spell. If they do, we don't yet know if they'll be capable of casting it. Even if they are, recall that the first experiment attracted a monster horde. Any number of unexpected situations may yet arise."

"That horde was doubtless some ploy of the demons, so they could 'rescue' our mages," claimed King George dismissively. "And while I'm aware heroes may eventually grow powerful beyond the bounds of common sense, Thomas has not yet done so. He is by no means the strongest individual in our kingdom. I very much hope that the church, which has gathered the strongest white mages of the continent under its banner, is not unable to replicate his feats."

"If it were easy, someone would have done it in the preceding centuries," pointed out Alexander. "But putting aside the question of

necessity, since you are obviously unconvinced, is it not simply the decent thing to do to aid someone who is giving so much to aid us?"

"*Aid us?*" spat King George, driven to rage by that argument. His knuckles whitened as he clenched his fists. "That so-called hero is a betrayer of us all! He promised to defend us from the demons, but then turned his back on us! Had he simply declared himself unwilling from the start, we could have explored other options or summoned another hero, but he did not. He strung Father along, made us dependent on him, then abandoned us. All for the sake of a single slave! For the life of a meaningless slave, he slew a king, as assuredly as if he'd tied the noose himself."

"So, you reveal your true thoughts at last," said Alexander, remaining calm in the face of the outburst. "There is assuredly more to the story than your rage permits you to articulate, but I see you will not be persuaded today, while the wound is still raw, so I shall not try. Instead, I beg you to consider what will happen if you remain on this path. Will you not drive the hero away, out of our lands? I would not have thought you wished to gift him to the demons."

King George sneered. "He's welcome to go. Of course, he won't be allowed to take his little harem with him; they are citizens of Ricousian, and they may not leave without my say-so. I wonder what would happen to them without him?"

"Hostages, then."

"Perhaps, although you're wrong about not being able to persuade me. To keep them as hostages to prevent the other nations from claiming our hero was my original intent, but the fact that you, the Archbishop of Odimere, are here on his behalf... The threat you speak of must be great indeed. I'm starting to think that I don't want it invading Ricousian on its way to him. Perhaps I *will* let them leave. I wonder how much of Ti'zharr would be destroyed, should a dragon attack him there?"

Alexander sighed in exasperation. "I see further conversation is useless. I shall be on my way, but before I leave, it would be remiss of me not to leave you with a brief sermon. Our gods teach that no life is meaningless, and I assure you that they will not differentiate

between a king and a slave, except perhaps to hold the king to an even higher standard. And you, Your Majesty, are a king. Today, you are defending yourself to me. One day, it will be to them. You would do well to keep that thought in mind as you rule."

"I did not permit you this audience to listen to lectures. Leave now, or else you will find me less welcoming in the future."

The disappointed archbishop turned and hobbled out of the throne room, supported on the arm of another priest as he slowly returned to his carriage.

"The important thing to remember is that Miraculum heals, but it is not a healing spell," I explained, trying to express the feelings that created the spell in words. "It purifies, but it is not a purification spell. First and foremost, it's a spell to save lives."

"Huh? But there's no one here in any danger," pointed out Daniel.

"Is there not? Should I fail to cast the spell here, what will happen?"

"Nothing? Like I said, there's no one else here."

"No, you're thinking too short-term. What will happen in the future?"

"I see," said Tony. "We are already suffering from chronic food shortages, but with the war reparations... Next season, we'd see widespread famine."

"That seems a rather nebulous justification," said Glenda. "We couldn't claim to have saved anyone specific."

"No, we couldn't point at anyone specific, but in general, we'll be saving many lives," I continued to explain. "But despite the lack of specificity, the 'who' is actually quite important. Should there be a famine, who would be the victims? Think hard about what would happen, exactly."

"What do you mean?" asked Tony. "The poor?"

"Do you think? Would they simply let themselves starve to death while those able to afford food continued to eat? I can't imagine anyone doing that."

"They'd resort to theft... But there'd be nothing for them to steal," pondered Daniel.

"There would be civil war," said Tony flatly.

"No, there wouldn't," said Johanna. "The king wouldn't let things go that far. He would... He would..."

"Yes?" I encouraged. "Continue that thought, because you're spot-on."

"Execution would become the punishment for almost any crime," suggested Jane.

"He'd repeal the Slave Treatment and Welfare Act," stated Daniel, aghast.

"Order the army to slaughter entire settlements..." said Tony.

"And how does that make you feel?" I asked.

"Awful, but why does that matter?"

"Because that's the second big part of the image. It's a spell to prevent injustice. Every time I think of that image—of innocent people being killed, not through any fault of their own, but simply to reduce the number of mouths that must be fed—it makes me *angry*. That is not how the world should be. And *that* is the image for this spell. The certain knowledge—and the anger that comes with it—that the world *should not be this way*."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Christine flinch, realizing exactly why I'd been able to cast the spell that first time, and how I'd have likely reacted had Mary actually died.

"Holy shit," opined Minoru. "That is *not* a normal spell image."

"Even if it works, once we've purified enough land to avoid mass starvation, won't the spell cease to be effective?" asked Daniel.

"That remains to be seen, but I don't believe so. After all, without solving the root of the problem, events will simply repeat themselves. As long as corrupted lands remain, monsters will be born. As long as monsters are born, the corruption will spread. As long as the corruption spreads, there will be innocent victims. The problem will not truly be solved until the corruption is completely erased."

"By that logic, why could this spell not be used as a weapon in the war? Demons were killing us by the thousand."

"I can't really say without trying it. I don't think it would work in a reasonable battle between soldiers. It would if the demons started

indiscriminately slaughtering civilians, but even then, it's a white spell. It would simply heal the civilians, not harm the demons. You already have effective healing magic."

"Not on a scale this wide," pointed out Tony. "But given the expected mana cost, I don't think using it as a wide-area healing spell would be feasible."

"Okay, I think we all have the idea. Everyone has cast Magiae Visus. Would you please cast Miraculum so we can observe?" asked Johanna.

"Yes," I agreed, employing a small amount of body strengthening on my throat. "**Miraculum**!"

As in my previous outdoor cast, there were no echoes, but the spell was nonetheless deafening. The surrounding fields of crops—wheat, unless my botany was rather worse than I thought—swayed in a nonexistent wind as the magic wrapped around the stalks. Flocks of birds took off, startled.

My body strengthening didn't stop the spell from sending me into a fit of coughing, but at least I didn't end up fertilizing the area with showers of blood, so there was some improvement.

"Wha?!" went Daniel, staggering backward as if punched.

Glenda fell over, clamping her hands over her ears in such a rush that she lost balance.

"Whoa, that felt...*weird*..." gasped Minoru, clutching at her stomach.

"You can't possibly expect us to cast *that*!" exclaimed Jane after a few moments of silence. "The amount of mana involved... The control you'd need... There's no way!"

Tony and Johanna pulled complicated expressions. While they hadn't reacted as strongly as the three green-trimmed members of their group—who I was starting to suspect were lower ranked—they were still obviously troubled by the weight of the spell.

"No individual has the mana capacity of a hero, and we expected this to require a ritual casting from the beginning," said Tony. "There's nothing for it but to try."

"With the members we have here, it's useless," said Johanna, shaking her head. "Even the five of us combined don't have the

capacity."

"No, we *have* to try!" exclaimed Daniel.

"Yes, it's too soon to give up," agreed Glenda. "Even if we don't have the mana, we can work on our image. We'll know when we've got it."

"Yes, because you'll fall into a coma," pointed out Johanna.

"It's what I intend to do," said Minoru.

Johanna glared at her.

"Unless *everyone* wants to give up, we'll stick to the plan," said Christine.

"Oh, great, more walking," muttered Jane.

Chapter 36: Equipment

"This isn't working," said Tony.

"No, it's too soon to give up," said Glenda. "We've *got* to make this work."

"A spell of this magnitude was never going to be learned in a single day," said Tony reassuringly. "It's time to return to Odimere."

"I still don't believe we'll ever be able to grasp it," said Johanna. "Rather than waste Thomas's time having him try to teach us, it would be better spent casting it himself, and then learning to imbue it into a staff."

"I... I still want to try," said Daniel. "But yes, we're out of time for today."

Minoru didn't state her opinion. She sat on the floor, eyes closed, a look of frustration on her face.

"I agree with Tony," said Christine. "It's a long walk back home, so it's time for us to return. Thomas, would you please clean up this area?"

"Okay, but first, there's something I'd like to try."

After all, I'd almost fully recovered from my earlier use of mana while the others were practicing. I could cast Miraculum again and still have plenty of capacity left over. "**Maius Omnium Visus**," I started, so that I could see what I was doing, followed up with "**Parvus Miraculum**!"

I had no idea whether a reduced form of the spell would work, but if so, it would hopefully be easier to learn and require less mana. Yes, it would be weaker, but if that meant people could actually cast it, it would be worth it.

The good news was that it worked, and while it had still taken a lot of mana, I judged it was no longer out of range of a capable nonheroic mage. The bad news was that the range was so low I didn't even need to move to see the end of it. Perhaps fifty yards.

Another spot of good news was that the existence of a lesser form also implied the existence of a greater one. No way would I have the mana capacity for it right now, but my capacity was still growing at an inhuman rate. Tomorrow, I'd likely be able to perform three Miraculum casts in a row. A week from now... Perhaps I'd give it a go.

"Well, that was interesting. Might still be good to practice with, but not useful for clearing land," I reported.

"There's a reduced form? Why didn't you mention that earlier?" asked Johanna.

"Because I didn't know. That was the first time I'd tested it."

"You just, what, *invented* a new spell? Without even knowing it existed?"

"It seemed a reasonable guess; don't most spells have lesser forms?" I shrugged. "Anyway... **Miraculum**!"

Once again, I sent the local wildlife darting away in shock. My students, having experienced it once already, barely flinched.

I'd noted the healthier crops in our first experimental casting, but this time, in the spirit of continued experimentation, I'd kept my eye on the nearest field, and the plants there had definitely perked up. In retrospect, it was an obvious result; the spell healed, even if that wasn't my focus, as evidenced by Toby's ears. It wasn't just purging miasma from the crops and soil, but healing the plants from the damage they had suffered.

"If there's a reduced form, we can try that tomorrow, right?" asked Daniel.

"Yes," agreed Tony. "I'll arrange for a carriage from the cathedral, so we'll not spend as long walking and will have more time available."

"Thank you," said Daniel.

"That spell wasn't as obviously out of our reach as Miraculum, and even a short range is plenty if it will make monster meat edible," said Johanna. "One more day, then. After tomorrow, we can't keep monopolizing Thomas's time. We can still practice the spell after that, but we must let him get on with purifying as much land as possible."

"Yes, that's sensible," agreed Tony. "We'll pick you up by carriage, if that's acceptable."

"It is." Christine nodded.

Minoru gave an unhappy growl as she sprang back to her feet, but I felt Johanna was the one being sensible. Stephanie had claimed to take a week to learn the basic spell Lux, while Wendy had taken half an hour. A huge range, but even at Wendy's speed, learning a spell on the level of Miraculum in a few hours seemed a stretch.

Thankfully, we reached our home without incident. Mary and Wendy had already returned.

"How did it go?" asked Wendy.

"As expected," answered Christine. "It would have been miraculous had they grasped it in a single day."

"A pity."

"Well, I for one am not giving up," declared Minoru. "I'm sticking to you like glue until I learn it."

"No hogging Master!" declared Mary, walking in from the kitchen with a pout.

She was wearing a black pleated skirt and purple T-shirt, apparently having followed my request to get herself some casual clothing. That was reasonable enough, but I didn't quite understand the other change to her appearance.

"Is it my imagination, or are you wearing makeup?" I asked.

"You noticed!" she said, beaming. "Wendy didn't think you would. Just a little bit, yes; I'm out of practice, and we didn't have any good mirrors. I'd quite like to grow my hair back out to the length it was before...before...but that's going to take ages."

"Before what?" asked Minoru, but no one answered.

"Isn't hair healable?" I asked, before remembering Stephanie and her resistance to cutting hers. "Guess not, but then how does everyone with a healed head wound not end up with bald patches?"

"There's a difference between growing existing hair and healing what has been lost," replied Wendy, but I didn't really see the logic. If hair grew back when healing a wound, how did it know how long to grow the hair to? Why would cutting the hair update that 'saved'

length, but cutting the scalp wouldn't? Then again, who was I to argue about the rules of healing magic? Coming from Earth, the fact there was magic at all was already against every rule I knew. Maybe it was just that there was a time limit, and a lost arm not quickly healed wouldn't be able to be regrown either.

"Oh, makeup!" exclaimed Minoru. "I did mine rather, uh, *provocatively* this morning, and I'd quite like to change it. If you want to practice, feel like a beauty session?"

Mary gave a conflicted look. On the one hand, she obviously wanted to, but on the other, she seemed to be taking the fact that she was now the *third* best healer in the group rather badly. "Go on, then," she said resignedly.

The pair of them vanished upstairs.

"You're okay leaving Mary alone with a demon?" asked Christine.

"Minoru isn't the one who tried to murder her a few days ago."

"You're never going to drop that, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Anyway," declared Wendy, interrupting us. "Aren't you going to ask what I bought?"

"Why do you sound excited?" I asked, suddenly nervous. In retrospect, sending Wendy to buy stuff was something of a risk. There was a real danger she'd come back with bikini armor or something equally ridiculous.

"Wait and see!" she said, which wasn't reassuring. "First, some leather armor. Christine was right about the army canceling orders and us being able to get their stuff for cheap, but obviously that means no custom-made stuff or anything particularly high-end. I found some good quality armor made from warg hide, and the tailor has adjusted it for you. He wasn't too happy about not being able to measure you himself, but I'm sure Mary's measurements were fine."

As she talked, Wendy dropped a sack onto the table. Inside was a collection of pieces of black leather, but none were neatly folded. From the looks of it, it *couldn't* fold; the pieces were too stiff. There was enough of it for full coverage. There was even a helmet, albeit an open-faced one.

Not bikini armor, then, which meant the interesting bit was yet to

come. Not that I could see any way for weapons to go too badly wrong. Perhaps they were bright pink or had flowery hilts?

"Warg leather isn't the best material available, but it's the toughest leather that can be manufactured in quantities large enough to outfit an army," said Christine with a nod. "I doubt you could have found anything better at such short notice, and with its stiffness, it pairs well with battle aura, but Thomas should get a custom set should the opportunity arise."

"I picked up a small shield too, but it's just a standard steel thing, more for completeness than anything else. For weapons, I found a decent spear with a steel shaft and darksteel tip. I also totally lucked out with this sword. It was a custom order from a complete idiot who came to collect it while I was paying for that spear. He refused to pay the agreed price, trying to use the end of the war as an excuse for a discount, and the blacksmith was so incensed he gave it to me instead—for even less than the commissioner was offering."

From another sack, Wendy produced a rather boring shield, with no ornamentation whatsoever. It was little more than a curved disk of steel with some padding and handles on the back. She followed it up with a mostly boring spear, a rod of steel about my height, but with a blackened head. Finally came a sword that was longer and broader than any I'd used before, but with my hero cheats, I didn't see any issue wielding it with one hand. It was forged from a silvery metal, with an ornate hilt and guard. Even the blade was engraved.

"Mithril?" asked Christine, surprised. "A lucky encounter, indeed. Perhaps a bit larger than Thomas is used to, but we'd struggle to find anything better made by human hands. Unless we happen to visit Kalolamenz, that should last for the rest of Thomas's time here."

So the best weapons were crafted in the dwarven kingdom? Someone had mentioned importing from them, so that wasn't a complete surprise.

When I picked it up, it was lighter than I expected, given the size. My blessing had translated the material as mithril, so it made sense that some of the connotations applied. Nevertheless, despite the unexpected find, I couldn't see Wendy getting excited about a sword.

"So, what else did you get?" I asked, certain there was something else.

"A bunch of magical catalysts and reagents. Enough to build some basic defenses around this place and to have a go at imbuing Miraculum into a staff. And also, *this*."

With the flourish of a magician who'd just pulled off a particularly impressive sleight of hand, Wendy pulled an ornate circlet of metal from beneath her cloak and set it carefully upon the table.

"That's a tiara," I pointed out.

It was obviously designed to be worn on the head, and given that the silvery color was an exact match for the sword, I guessed the frame was mithril. It was twisted into a floral design, and set into the center of each flower was a white gem. Front and center was a much larger diamond, and I could feel the mana bleeding off the thing without even needing mana vision.

"Wendy...?" said Christine, slowly and quietly. "*Please* tell me you didn't steal that."

"Of course not!"

"The money Minoru loaned us wouldn't even come *close* to paying for that treasure, if it was even for sale in the first place, which I am absolutely certain it was not."

"Can someone tell me what it is?" I interjected. "Apparently Christine knows already, and I'm getting the impression it's pretty famous..."

"Vena's Grace," answered Christine. "It's a holy relic of the church, only ever bestowed on those who achieve the rank of saintess. And again I must ask, why do *you* have it?"

"Maybe I'm a saintess?" laughed Wendy.

"Be serious!" snapped Christine, who was looking almost as disturbed as the time she realized I knew the attack on Mary had been staged. Wendy getting her hands on the relic was obviously a big deal.

"Spoilsport. If you must know, it was nothing to do with me. Archbishop Alexander *personally* dropped it off earlier. Said he'd tried to talk to King George, but that he couldn't get through to him, so he'd offer what aid he could instead. It makes sense, given its

power, and the situation the kingdom's in. He does want it back when we're done, though."

Christine relaxed a little upon learning that the Archbishop of Odimere had delivered it in person. I, on the other hand, still had an issue.

"It's a tiara," I repeated. "And it's flowery."

"Tough." Wendy shrugged. "It's not as if we can modify it into something that better fits your fashion sense. Christine wasn't joking about this being an important relic, so no way can we remodel it."

"Besides, it's not as if you'll be wearing it in front of people," said Christine. "No one beyond us can know you have it."

"Especially the bishops of the church," added Wendy. "The archbishop was quite clear about that. He gave the distinct impression that he hadn't exactly gone through official channels to lend us this."

"Fine," I agreed, glad I wasn't going to need to wear it down the street. "I suppose it'll go well with my dress, at least. So, what does it do?"

I suffered an odd moment of confusion, expecting Mary to correct "dress" to "robe," but it never came. Apparently, playing with makeup was sufficiently absorbing for her that she wasn't paying us any attention. It seemed another step in the right direction of getting her mind back.

"Remember my brief lesson on foci?" asked Wendy. "Well, it's basically nothing more than a focus. The only thing that makes it special is that it's a *very* powerful one. While wearing it, it's doubtful you'll be able to cast any nonwhite spells at all, but white spells will require only a third of the mana. It'll triple the number of Miraculum casts you can perform per day."

Wow. As timing went, that was pretty cool. "This plays well into something else I learned today. I tried applying the 'Parvus' modifier to Miraculum, and it worked perfectly. Pity I couldn't wield enough mana to try pushing it in the other direction."

"Oh..." said Wendy, immediately grasping what I was implying. "This should be fun..."

"But not tomorrow," said Christine, shooting down the idea

immediately. “As we said, you can’t use it in front of the other members of the church.”

“Okay, not tomorrow,” I agreed. “No harm in giving my capacity another day to grow, anyway.”

“And not anywhere near the city either,” added Wendy. “Given the weight of Miraculum, an enhanced version is likely to outright demolish nearby structures.”

Yes, okay. That would be bad. Although, personally, I was more worried about what it was going to do to my throat. Was lung prolapse a thing? I wasn’t looking forward to finding out.

Chapter 37: Reunion

"A carriage just pulled up outside," said Mary, watching from a window. "Is this who you were expecting?"

"Is it full of priests?" I asked from the dining table, where I had long since finished breakfast and was simply waiting around, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

The discomfort stemmed from my outfit. I was dressed in my black armor, and it was stiffer than what I'd been wearing during training. It didn't restrict my range of motion, but it did provide a slight resistance, throwing off my movements. Even when trying to perform the simple act of grasping my glass of water, I'd *missed*, knocking the glass over and spilling its contents all over the table. With a bit of practice, I'd doubtless get used to it, but for now, I'd been left rather clumsy.

Still, I would've rather worn it than the "outdoor clothes" Mary had come back with yesterday. With laxer monetary constraints, she'd gone a little wild, coming back with an outfit that started with breeches and a waistcoat and only got worse from there. There was a frock coat. There was a top hat and cane. There was even a cravat, which I suspected Mary had added simply because there was no way in heck I'd be able to tie it myself, forcing me to rely on her to dress me.

Apparently, it was the sort of outfit a lower-ranked noble would wear if they felt like going out for a ride on their horse. Thankfully, there hadn't been enough time yesterday or this morning to model it for her, but I rather suspected it was going to feature at some point in my future. I was torn between wanting Mary to recover her free will and terror of what she would do once she did. Combined with her own makeup purchase, I was a little concerned about her broad definition of "necessities."

Still, at least my outfits were better than Minoru's. I'd thought the

simple white dress she'd been wearing yesterday had been a little short for her, but the miniskirt she was wearing today was so skimpy that it would be more accurately described as a belt. It was accompanied by a tank top that left her midriff completely exposed. Given that she'd expected her mission to involve seduction, she'd apparently packed nothing but provocative outfits. Not that she seemed to particularly care about the indecency; her bigger concern was the temperate weather, so she'd borrowed a cloak from Wendy to throw over the top, giving her a rather mismatched look.

"It is indeed them," confirmed Christine, who had gone to look out the window while I was busy having a fashion crisis. "Tony is getting out. Let's depart."

She opened the door, which let in a surprising amount of noise. There seemed to be some amount of shouting coming from the carriage. Tony, halfway between carriage and door, had turned around to see what was going on.

"Is something wrong?" asked Christine as the pair of us stepped out of the house.

"I don't—" started Tony, but before he could finish, the carriage door burst open. Daniel jumped out, evading a grasping hand from behind, and charged straight at me.

There was a blur, and then he was on the floor, Christine pinning him down.

"Mary!" shouted Glenda, jumping from the carriage in turn. With Christine occupied, I grabbed her as she approached, but she almost seemed not to even notice. "Mary!" she called again, as she struggled against my grip; it obviously hadn't been me either of them were aiming for, but our front door behind me.

Daniel, struggling against Christine on the floor, looked up, flashing me a look of pure hatred. "And you call yourself a hero," he spat.

"What?" I asked, utterly confused.

"Mom? Dad?" asked Mary, leaving the house and sounding just as confused as I was. Or more accurately, as I had been. Those two words were enough to solve my confusion and explain everything about the pair's reaction. They must have spotted her through the

window. “Why are you here?”

“Mary!” exclaimed Glenda, taking advantage of my shock to escape my grip, then charging at my maid and wrapping her in a tight embrace. “Mary! It’s really you! Why are you here?!”

“That’s what I just asked,” replied Mary, sounding rather nonplussed. Shouldn’t a reunion with her parents involve more excitement? For that matter, she had never mentioned her family except when directly asked. “I’m here because I work here.”

“It really is her...!” said Daniel from the floor, where he was still pinned. With Mary in his sight, he’d stopped struggling. “Wait! Your collar!” he suddenly gasped, spotting that Mary’s neck was bare.

“Master isn’t a fan of slavery,” said Mary, which, while true, wasn’t one of the most internally consistent sentences I’d ever heard.

“She’s free, but she hasn’t fully recovered from the psychological side effects,” I explained.

“You freed her?” asked Glenda, turning to me with tears in her eyes. “So, everything we’ve done since then... We’ve been saving so desperately to buy her back... With the bonus we’d been promised if we learned Miraculum, we might even have managed it one day... But now... I don’t know if I should laugh or cry. It was all pointless...”

That certainly explained why the pair had been so desperate to learn the spell.

“Then why *are* you still here!” exclaimed Daniel, still on the floor. “Why haven’t you come home?”

“Master is here...” she said, tilting her head in confusion.

“Mary, you don’t *have* to stay with me,” I reminded her. “That’s what freedom *means*. You have a family. Don’t you want to be with them?”

Given her condition, I felt that asking questions like “Why didn’t you contact them?” would be rather cruel, but having them here in front of her, wouldn’t she rather go home?

“No... I’m...” she stammered. “You’re my master... I must...”

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Daniel. “It’s that damn brainwashing, isn’t it?! How can they do something so evil?”

“Evil?” asked Minoru, who had joined Wendy in leaving the house

to see what the fuss was about.

"No, it's, uh... How do I explain?" I said, unsure what to do.

"If you want to poke that scab, right now, with her parents here, would be the perfect time," said Wendy. "Why don't we all give the four of you a few minutes of privacy?"

"I...think that would be for the best, yes," said Tony, backing away.

"Can someone please explain what's going on?" grumbled Minoru, but Wendy pushed her toward the carriage. Christine released Daniel and left to join them.

"Why don't you come in?" I asked, inviting the pair back into our house.

Despite Wendy's assertion, I wasn't convinced that poking the scab was the best option. Mary had specifically asked me not to, so not pushing her was, in a way, her choice. But then, so was selling herself in the first place. I wanted to respect her wishes, but I had no idea how to best do that! I also wanted to help her, and Daniel and Glenda were healers, on top of being her parents. Surely they were the best people to help?

Daniel was right about the evil. The best I could do was to tell them and let them decide.

I opened my mouth to speak.

"You're going to tell them, aren't you?" said Mary, sounding terrified but resigned.

I closed my mouth again, then rethought my next words. "Do you want me to? They can help, and I won't be here forever."

"I... I miss the simplicity," she admitted. "It's so much easier to just pretend nothing has changed. I...know I can't keep taking advantage of you forever, but...I'm scared. The moment you say it out loud...I have to admit it really happened..."

"*What* happened?" begged Daniel. "Please, can't you tell us what's wrong?"

Sometimes, I wondered if this world was worth saving. Yes, these two were concerned now, but they were the ones who had let Mary sell herself in the first place. Had there been any choice? What else could they have done?

"I don't know the details myself, but as far as we can gather, before she was assigned to work for me, she was made to do things that the brainwashing made her happy to do, but that the original 'her' found so abhorrent that she can't admit to herself they happened. She's sort of convinced herself she's still a brainwashed slave, because if she's still brainwashed, she's still happy and content and doesn't need to think for herself. But she *does* think for herself, and then she gets confused whenever anyone points out the resulting contradictions."

Not to mention the plot to kill her, which certainly wouldn't have helped her mental state, regardless of what had happened to her prior to my summoning. Given that her parents needed to work with Christine, though, there was no way I could mention that to them.

"That's...messed up," said Glenda.

"What can we do?" asked Daniel.

Mary said nothing, staring at her own feet and shaking.

"I have no idea. You're the healers. All I've been able to do is offer friendship and try to treat her normally."

"Just because we're good at white magic doesn't mean we have any idea how to deal with this..." said Daniel.

"Bah! Of course we do," said Glenda, stepping in and wrapping the shaking Mary in a tight hug. "It's okay. We still love you, whether you're free or not, whether you want to live with us or not, or even if you don't remember us at all. Please, keep doing whatever makes you happy. That's the most any parent can wish for."

"Yeah, it's obvious when you put it like that," agreed Daniel. "We're here for you. Whenever you want us, we'll be there. If you don't, we'll pray for you. You don't have to 'get better.' We love you just the way you are. But if anyone takes advantage of you, even if they're a hero, I'm still going to smack them."

I snorted with laughter at the unnecessary addition to the end.

Mary didn't. She burst into tears, and then cried and cried and cried.

The C-ranked slayer James—leader of the rather unimaginatively named party "James's Posse"—sidestepped the dive of a thrullian

bomber—a monstrous, featherless bird that would fly high in the air and dive at its victims—then made a powerful swing with his heavy two-hander as it passed. The blow cleaved the monster in two, but the cut was messy, splashing guts out all over the ground.

"Gross," said Lindy, the party's scout. "I hope you're not expecting me to harvest that mess."

"You really should put more effort into maintaining your equipment," complained Emma, the party's mage. "Your sword's getting a little blunt there."

"It's not my fault that the very first monster we ran into today was an armored boar!" complained James. "It really did a number on my sword's edge. I'll sharpen it when we're done, and if that's not good enough, lend me some money for some mithril."

"Yeah... A mithril sword *that* size? Not gonna happen," laughed Susan, the party's healer.

"Hmm..." said Lindy.

"What? You gonna complain too?"

"No, I was just thinking today's encounters have been weird. Not enough of them, for a start. Is there a monster vacation day that someone forgot to tell me about?"

"That's not a thing."

"I know. It's just...odd. And I don't like odd."

"True. The middle of the corrupted lands is not a place where we hope for unexpected events."

"Says the person who insisted on taking *that* quest," snidely remarked Emma.

"Look, I apologized! I didn't know it was going to turn out like that."

"Quiet," demanded Lindy. "No one move."

She stooped to the ground, holding an ear against the exposed rock. The rest of the party knew enough not to distract her, watching with concern as she remained perfectly still for thirty seconds.

"Miasmic flood," she muttered, jumping back to her feet and looking around wildly.

"What?" asked James, despite having heard her perfectly well.

"It's a stampede! Can't tell exactly where from, but it's heading

toward us!”

James paled. “Run,” he ordered, and the party obeyed.

There was no talk of heroics, no suggestion anyone would stay and hold them off while the others escaped. There was no point. What could one slayer do against a flood?

No, there was no room for heroism in their decisions. Only cold logic. “Lindy. You’re the fastest. Run ahead and warn Odimere. We need to stop the flood before it leaves the corrupted lands.”

Lindy accelerated. Alas, there was a marked difference between what was needed and what was possible, and every one of the four knew it. The kingdom’s army had been defeated, its remains still in the north, yet to return from the war. The slayers of the capital would be out on missions, but even were they all gathered, it was doubtful they’d have the forces to turn back the flood. A large flood had historically required a hero summoning to resolve.

No, however fast she ran, there was no hope of turning it back. Nevertheless, they were the words James chose simply because he couldn’t bring himself to say what he really thought. With the corrupted lands having grown so close to the capital already, there was no way it wouldn’t be overrun. Lindy was running ahead because evacuation was the only chance the residents of Odimere had. The capital of the kingdom—the oldest surviving settlement of humans on the continent—was lost.

Chapter 38: Success

I was distracted from the parents-daughter joint bawling session by a knock on the door. "Sorry to intrude, but we need to get going," came Tony's voice from behind it.

"Go without me," said Daniel. "I'll stay with Mary."

I opened the door to see Tony frowning. "I know this is an emotional reunion, but after you pushed so hard to get onto this mission, I can't give you permission to drop out simply because you decide you no longer need the money. It's too important for that."

"Oh, no, it's not that at all," said Glenda, looking up with puffy, bloodshot eyes.

"Oh, you too?" asked Daniel.

"Of course. How could I not understand Thomas's point about injustice and anger after *that*?"

"Huh?" I asked, not understanding what they were getting at.

Thankfully, I didn't need to work it out.

The pair of them held hands, placed their other hands atop Mary's head, and together uttered, "**Parvus Miraculum**."

It was obvious to everyone that the spell had worked. The ringing in my ears left no doubt.

There was also the way Daniel stumbled, suddenly sweating, while Glenda outright collapsed.

"Mom!" shouted Mary, catching her before she hit the floor.

I caught Daniel by the arm and helped him to a chair, while Tony stared slack-jawed. It was a good ten seconds before he finished processing what had just happened, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head. "I see, but that just makes it even more important that you come with us. An explanation from one who has learned the spell will be a great aid to the rest of us."

"Go on, Dad," encouraged Mary, who had stopped crying and reverted back to her usual smile. Somehow, it looked brighter than

before. “I’m fine now. I’ll look after Mum. You go and show off.”

“Fine,” he said, but despite his legs wobbling, he didn’t stand up. “Uh... I may need some help getting to the carriage. That was rather mana intensive.”

“Here,” sighed Tony, taking a green potion from a pocket in his robe. Daniel gratefully drank it, his breathing quickly easing and his pallid complexion clearing back up. It was less than half a minute before he could stand and walk again.

“I still have no idea what those mana potions actually do,” I commented as the three of us made our way back to the carriage, but if anyone heard, they didn’t feel the need to enlighten me. If we ever reached the point where everything stopped being so urgent, I really wanted to attend that magic academy.

Wendy stood outside the carriage, desperately struggling to escape from Christine’s iron grip. She sagged in defeat as she saw us. “You made me miss the whole thing!” she complained at the knight.

“You’ve already seen Thomas cast it,” sighed Christine. “And I’m sure he’ll cast the lesser version for you later if you want.”

“Yes, but that was its first ever ritual casting! Dammit, I’m coming with you today, in case anyone else casts it.”

The sullen mage turned around and pushed back past Christine, planting herself in the carriage with her arms crossed.

“I suppose we have a free seat, since Glenda’s staying behind,” acknowledged Tony, trying to excuse Wendy’s behavior.

Before long, the carriage was trundling down the road, carrying our group of eight. Christine had replaced Johanna as driver, and I joined her. There were only six seats inside the carriage, and Christine and I were the only two not desperate to listen to Daniel’s experience of casting the spell.

I found myself more preoccupied with Mary. What had her parents’ spell done to her? Had it “fixed” her completely? Given the shared breakdown the three of them had, had she already been fixed before then?

And the most important question: Was she going to stay or return to her family?

Obviously, she *should* return to her family. She wasn't a prisoner. I wasn't even paying her; I had nothing to pay her with! If her mind recovered completely, joining the church as an apprentice healer was practically a no-brainer. By the time we got back that evening, she'd probably be gone, and that was kinda sad. I'd grown attached to the poor girl.

Well, that much had been obvious when I went on the warpath for her, back when they'd tried to kill her.

"Are you okay? You're grumbling to yourself," Christine pointed out.

I peered at her. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, she'd tried to murder Mary, and yet here I was, sitting next to her, completely unconcerned. And if she vanished, I knew I'd miss her too.

Come to think of it, Mary probably wasn't the only one of our group who'd gone slightly insane trying to cope with her personal circumstances. I'd been kidnapped, and then my kidnappers had tried to mislead me into joining a war on their side. Yes, they had their reasons, but I was fairly sure the fact I *empathized* with those reasons was a sort of Stockholm syndrome. How I'd stayed so calm when they first summoned me was a mystery.

Unless... Was *that* was part of my divine blessings too? Was something mucking with my personality, *keeping* me calm? I'd been told summoned heroes were immune to any sort of mind control, but perhaps the reason for that was that a god had got in first.

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm just feeling a bit disillusioned," I replied.

Christine raised an eyebrow.

"Don't worry about me. I was just thinking it's time I saved your kingdom and went home already. I'm not cut out to be a hero."

"You *want* to go home?" she asked. "Historically, most heroes have wanted to stay longer by the time they get sent back."

"Really?"

"Maybe they just don't want to leave their harems behind."

"Ha. Maybe."

Actually, she was probably closer than she thought. This was the first time I'd found myself thinking that I wanted to hurry up and go

home. And it just so happened that it was right after Mary rediscovered her family and would be leaving us. It was obvious I cared for her, but did I care *that* much?

I continued wallowing in doubt as Christine drove us south from Odimere, toward the corrupted lands. The crops here were in noticeably worse condition than yesterday, when we'd headed the same distance north.

"Presumably when Odimere was built, the corrupted lands weren't so close?" I asked.

"Certainly not. It's not a pre-dragon settlement—no towns or cities survived the war against the dragons and then the demon lord—but it was built soon after the war ended, and at that time, the border of the corrupted lands was a couple hundred miles farther south. Frankly, if it weren't the kingdom's capital, the city would have been abandoned long ago, but moving the royal palace is not exactly easy. Thankfully, the proximity of the corrupted lands works both ways. As close as it is, scrying it from the capital is easy, and slayers can respond rapidly to information, so keeping the monster population down has proven trivial. In the event of the slayers being overwhelmed, the army or even royal guard can be quickly deployed too."

"Not right now," I commented.

"It's true that our scryers and army have been largely based in the north of the country over the past few months, but the capital's slayers are more than up to the task of keeping the monsters under control. Anyway, I think this is sufficient distance."

Christine stopped the carriage, pulling over on the dirt track that ran between the fields of crops. I was no botanist, but since all I could see were yellowed leaves, I guessed they were some sort of root vegetable. Given that most of the crops had been wheat—and indeed, I could see taller crops on all sides of us—this position had likely been chosen so everyone present could easily see what was going on.

The priests, Wendy, and Minoru piled out, all looking thoughtful. Hopefully, whatever Daniel had shared would prove useful.

"How strange," said Minoru, a distant expression on her face as

she clutched at her belly with one hand. "How can a spell become so clear even before I've cast it? I *know* I'm capable now. And all it took..." Her ears drooped, her tail hanging limp behind her. "Well, even if I didn't exactly volunteer, it's not as if I strongly opposed it. The injustice is the simple fact that the world makes that sort of thing necessary in the first place."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, wondering what sort of conversation I'd missed.

"Nothing that's your fault," she said, turning to me. "I'm going to need healing after this, though," she added before closing her eyes. "**Mir**ac—"

I didn't have mana sight active, but I didn't need it to know that she'd at least partially succeeded. The first syllable of the spell blasted into the world with enough force to knock me a step back. Hearing someone else cast it was a completely different experience to doing it myself, but it was just as awe-inspiring.

The second syllable was weaker, with none of the strange harmonics that denoted a magical spell. The rest of the word didn't happen at all. Minoru simply fell limp, blood streaming down her face from eyes, nose, and mouth. Her ears were obviously bleeding too, staining her pink hair red.

I instinctively activated body strengthening, rushing in before she could fall and catching her. "**Maius Sanatio**!" I chanted, which at least stopped the bleeding, but it wasn't enough to wake her.

"Don't think I've ever seen anyone overdraw on mana to that extent before," commented Wendy. "It wouldn't surprise me if she's out cold for a week. Normally, a spell so far beyond one's abilities would completely fail to activate. She must have had a really strong grasp of the image."

"**Maius Omnium Visus**," I chanted, activating my mana sight. Regular sight was sufficient to confirm the surrounding crops hadn't been healed, their leaves still an unhealthy yellow, but mana sight showed the miasma was still present too. Despite the partial success, she hadn't achieved anything. Still, she would probably be able to take her knowledge back to demon territory with her and spread it around.

Was Minoru going to be leaving me now, as well as Mary? I'd only met her yesterday, and yet I was already at the point that I kinda liked the girl. At least I could be fairly confident Wendy was going to stick around. Christine... I honestly had no idea what she was thinking. As long as no one ordered her otherwise, she'd probably stay with me out of simple inertia, even after the priests successfully learned to cleanse the corrupted land.

"I'm glad we didn't get around to embedding this spell in any magical items, though," added Wendy.

"Why?" I asked.

"No one would be able to use it. Remember, I described such tools simply as a way of casting spells you lack affinity for, but that they don't do anything to negate the need for an image; hence why they were useless for you. Rather, they're *harder* to use, and take *more* mana. From the experiences of Daniel, and from observing Minoru, I can say with certainty that such an item would be nearly useless."

"Then it's a good job we have a bunch of white mages who are starting to pick it up."

"Indeed, and I can hardly let myself fall behind and still call myself a bishop," declared Tony. "Let's all aim for a successful cast today."

"Yes, sir!" declared Jane, getting caught up in the wave of enthusiasm.

Johanna looked far less energetic, but even she managed a small smile. "Can't let the demons master this spell before us," she muttered before taking on a look of concentration.

"And to think I was feeling a little pessimistic after yesterday," I commented as I carefully placed Minoru back in the carriage to sleep off her mana exhaustion. "This is going great."

"Fuck," commented King George Ricousian, succinctly summing up his thoughts on the report he'd just received.

"Shall I give the order to evacuate?" asked Minister Serge.

"Hmm... Not yet. This is based on the word of a single slayer. We must confirm it. What the hell are our scryers doing?"

"There are only a few left in Odimere, and of those that are, you had most keeping an eye on the hero," answered Minister Dennis.

"Are you saying this is *my* fault?" demanded the king.

"Not at all. A horde building up to the reported size in only a few months is unprecedented, and I didn't say there were *no* scryers keeping their eyes on the corrupted lands. I can't imagine them overlooking a miasmic flood. I share your suspicion that the report is mistaken."

"Well, get the scryers to check it *right now*!"

Dennis went running out of the room.

"Speaking of the hero, I believe their party traveled south today," commented Serge. "If the report is accurate, there's a good chance they're standing right in the path of the flood. I suggest sending a cavalry detachment to retrieve him."

"That won't be necessary," sneered the King. "After all, he's already successfully passed on his spell."

"Oh? But even if so, aren't those priests with him?"

"Not all of them. As Dennis remarked, I've been keeping them under watch, and the watchers reported that one of them stayed behind. The mother of that slave Dennis donated to the hero. We can be rid of the hero and his party, along with the demon we were forced to accept, all without losing Miraculum."

"Odimere is a large price to pay to satisfy a grudge."

"As much as I despise Thomas, please don't assume I'm letting that grudge cloud my judgment. Assuming the accuracy of that report, do you believe that retrieving the hero would be enough to save Odimere?"

Serge spent a moment considering the question. "No."

"Me neither. Though I detest him, I'm not going to sacrifice my kingdom for revenge. This isn't a trade; removing that hero is merely a consolation prize. Besides, given this report, I'm not convinced there's time to stage a rescue. And, coward or not, he's still a hero. He'll fight to the last to protect the people with him. Even if he fails, he could delay the horde enough for us to evacuate, or damage it enough that Odimere is not overrun."

Serge frowned, but he had to admit the king was right. They

didn’t know exactly where the hero was, nor where the monsters were. A rescue attempt would be a gamble, while leaving him to face the horde would increase the chances of the capital surviving. Still, to abandon such a powerful game piece as the hero sat somewhat ill with him.

“The final element of my reasoning is that we were warned something was coming for the hero,” continued King George.

“*What?!* You *knew* this would happen?”

“Not this, nor were we expecting it so soon. We simply knew that *something* was coming for the hero. It’s possible that once the hero dies, the horde will turn back.”

“Okay, then there’s nothing more we can do,” agreed Serge, a position that was only reinforced when Dennis returned with a preliminary response from the intelligence division of the court mages.

The horde was not only every bit as big as feared, but it had already left the corrupted lands.

Chapter 39: Death

"This isn't working," sighed Johanna.

"I'm starting to suspect that the trick is firsthand involvement in a highly emotional event," agreed Tony. "It's not enough to hear about how someone else triggered it. It requires someone to *be there*."

"Please don't say that out loud," I begged, shuddering at the thought of what the king would do if he thought emotional trauma was a required condition. If King George held a similar viewpoint to his parents about the needs of the many versus the needs of the few, these priests' children would be up for execution by teatime.

"It's a pity Minoru hasn't woken up, or we could ask her what she was thinking," said Jane.

"Yeah... Unfortunately, she's going to be out for a while," said Wendy, glancing at the carriage from which an interesting cross between purring and snoring was loudly emanating. "It's a pity I have no affinity for white magic whatsoever. I want to try."

"Well, what other myths are there, then? Any that involve spells of other colors?" I asked. "Perhaps there's a green equivalent for you."

Wendy peered at me thoughtfully, but before she had a chance to answer, Christine interrupted. "Everyone, stop moving and remain silent."

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Johanna, failing the "remain silent" request instantly. Not that her quiet question was particularly noisy compared to Minoru's continued sleep-purring.

"Quiet!" demanded Christine, drawing her sword.

In the distance to the south, clouds of birds took off, spooked by something that wasn't me casting overly loud spells.

Getting the message that something was very wrong, the four clergy nervously edged toward the carriage. Wendy approached Christine more calmly. "How many?" she whispered.

"I don't know, but we're about to find out. Thomas, prepare to defend yourself."

I might have been armored, but we weren't *actually* expecting an attack. I'd left my weapons in the carriage, so I had to run ahead of the priests to grab them. By the time I had my buckler strapped to my arm, my sheathed sword at my side, and my spear in hand, Christine had slain a few wolves that had burst out of the southern wheat fields and rushed toward us.

"Am I too late? Is it over?" I asked.

Christine was too focused on the southern horizon to respond, which was all the answer I needed. Sure enough, a few seconds later, another—larger—group of wolves emerged from between the yellow stalks.

"**Ventus Ferri**," declared Wendy, and half of them died, blood and limbs launched into the air as blades of wind tore the weak monsters apart. "What are the slayers doing, to let an entire wolf pack leave the corrupted lands?" she grumbled.

Christine and I finished the rest without issue. For my very first battle against monsters, it was somewhat anticlimactic; the wolf charged face-first into my spear. I hadn't needed to do anything but stand there and make sure the point was facing in the correct direction.

Christine continued to stare. "Thomas, get out of here," she ordered.

"What?"

"I said *get out of here*!" she hissed, doing that odd thing where she obviously wanted to yell but also didn't want to make any noise. Her voice was laced with panic, which was somewhat alarming. I'd *never* seen Christine panic, even during the whole staged assassination thing. "Get those priests into the carriage, then *run*! You can pull it faster than the horse."

"That bad, huh," said Wendy, who showed no signs of fleeing.

"You want me to abandon you?!" I hissed back.

"I want you to live long enough to save our kingdom!" snapped Christine. "Which you will not do if you delay here a second longer. This isn't a pack of wolves—it's a *horde*. I'll cover your retreat as

best I can, but you need to run *now*!"

Wendy swore, and the noise to the south became audible even to me. A touch of body strengthening to enhance my hearing, and the sounds snapped into perfect clarity. Growling, roaring, chittering. Heavy footsteps, slithering, pounding. An uncountable number of sources, making a wide range of noises.

"Didn't you hear her? Run!" I yelled at the priests as I took position next to my two party members.

"Didn't *you* hear *me*?!" replied Christine.

"Yes, and I'm ignoring you," I replied, readying my spear. Best to conserve mana if there was a whole horde to deal with, so I'd rely on weapons for as long as possible. "I'm not letting you sacrifice yourselves. We fight together."

This time, Christine didn't argue back, simply staring south with an increasingly disbelieving expression.

"What are you doing?!" asked a surprised Wendy. "Stop being an idiot, Thomas. This world *needs* you. It doesn't need us."

Johanna apparently didn't share my dislike of letting others sacrifice themselves to cover her escape, jumping into the driver's seat of the carriage and flicking the reins. The carriage took off as fast as the horse could pull it.

"Seriously! Get out of here!" yelled Wendy.

"There's no point," answered Christine. "Whether he runs or not makes no difference."

"Huh? You sound like you've already given up," I commented, just as the horde left the cover of the wheat field. "Oh..." I added as it *kept on coming*.

A wall of monsters, most species of which I didn't even recognize, stretched from east to west. No individual monster looked particularly threatening; the bulk of the monsters were rats or wolves, with only an occasional larger specimen mixed in, but what they lacked in individual power, they made up for in quantity. They climbed over each other as the wall surged forward in a singular mass, a vast tidal wave of meat.

"That's no simple horde..." commented Wendy, taking an involuntary step back as her face paled.

"Miasmic flood," agreed Christine. "The capital is lost, but I'm damn well going to make them pay for every inch of land they take."

This time, she didn't wait for the monsters to bring the fight to her, instead blurring forward. Crescent fangs—fired faster than I could track—shot forward, each one tearing through half a dozen monsters. But for each one that fell, a hundred more were waiting behind.

"Okay, Thomas, listen *very* carefully, because we don't have much time," said Wendy, who had drawn a knife. She slashed it across her wrist, a stream of blood trickling to the ground. "**Parvus Terra**," she chanted, and a reverse fountain of soil erupted upward, mixing with the blood and falling back to the ground in a carefully controlled way.

"What the heck?! This is hardly the time for—"

"*Shut up!* Please, for the first time since we summoned you, just listen to me and *do what I say*. No questions. No arguing. No thinking. Just *listen*."

If Wendy had a plan, I was going to do my best to help, so rather than shutting up, I did what I could to buy her time. "**Maius Procella**! **Maius Procella**! **Maius Procella**!"

A trio of enormous whirlwinds shot up around us, monsters spiraling into the sky. Crops were torn out of the soil, and then the soil itself was ripped from the ground, twisting into the air. And then the blades of wind struck, and the whirlwinds turned a dirty red. Tornadoes of blood and dust, tearing through the monstrous horde.

And it *wasn't enough*.

The spells were overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of monsters. The whirlwinds were full and could lift no more. Weighed down, the magic dissipated.

I fired off more magic, spending mana like water in an effort to buy Wendy a few more seconds to complete whatever runic circle she was working on.

"Done!" she yelled after what seemed like an eternity, despite probably only being a handful of seconds. "Thomas, get over here and stand in the center."

I didn't move. I *recognized* the circle. I'd only seen it once before,

and though that time it had been chalk white rather than bloodred, the day was seared into my memory. I was hardly going to forget any detail of it. "You're trying to send me home," I accused.

"This is the only way you survive today," she said flatly. "Please. There's no way this flood hasn't been detected. The capital will be evacuating. Glenda knows your spell, and will assuredly be at the head of that evacuation, along with Mary. You've *already* done more for us than we could have hoped for. You've given us the means to save the continent. We can't ask you to die for us too."

"**Maius Conflagratio**!" I yelled, setting another swath of the horde alight before it could reach us. "You really expect me to just abandon you?"

"If you die, what will Mary think?" asked Wendy, launching a violent mental attack. "Not to mention that this horde is probably your fault. No way should this many monsters have been able to gather unnoticed. It's probably related to your dream. If this is what was coming for you, then if you leave, they might all turn around and leave the rest of us alone."

"I... I..." I stuttered, taking a step toward the circle.

"You're fighting well, but you'll run out of mana long before the horde runs out of monsters," she continued, erasing my excuses one by one before I could even make them.

I took another step forward. Casting multiple high-tier offensive spells in succession was certainly straining my mana capacity. I could keep going for a while yet, but I had no idea how many monsters were in the horde. I certainly hadn't made a noticeable dent. The monsters could almost definitely keep going for longer.

Was this it, then? Was this how my adventure ended? By *running away*?

"At least let me use up the rest of my mana capacity," I argued. "Each monster I kill is one less to attack Odimere."

Now it was Wendy's turn to hesitate.

A scream from deep behind the wall of monsters suggested that things weren't going well for Christine.

"Fine," agreed Wendy, clearly reluctant.

"And remember my question about other myths? Now would be a

great time to answer."

"Nex," replied Wendy after a moment's hesitation, staring at the circle she'd drawn in her own blood. "From a myth of Bryax, the god of death. In the myth, he used it to rip the life from an entire army of elves who had invaded his domain to recover their dead queen. A hundred thousand souls taken in an instant. Probably take even you a while to work out how to cast, though. In case I happen to get killed before you manage it, I'll fill this circle with mana. Just step into it within the next few minutes, and it'll take you straight home."

The god of death? The opposite of Anypha, the goddess of life, whose story gave us Miraculum. A pair of opposites. One spell for saving, and one for killing. But in this case, to save, I needed to kill.

As with Miraculum, there was no clue as to the image, but once again, I didn't care. I needed the monster horde to die. All of it. Every monster for miles around should simply *drop dead*. It was a simple enough request, was it not?

"**Nex**!" I declared, the single syllable blasting out across the landscape with reality-shattering force. The fires of my Maius Conflagratio were instantly extinguished. The lingering winds of Maius Procella ceased. All at once, the pounding footfalls of the horde ended.

For a moment, the world fell utterly silent.

And then the silence was broken as the uncountable multitude of monsters slumped and fell where they stood, thousands of corpses thudding into the ground all at once. No blood, no wounds, they had all just simply died, the life ripped from their bodies without leaving a single mark.

The silence resumed, not even broken by my coughing—the single deadly syllable had ironically spared my reinforced throat from the damage of the longer Miraculum. There was no more noise, even to my enhanced hearing. I was fairly confident that the single spell had ended the entire flood.

For a few seconds more, everything remained still, without so much as a breeze disturbing the scene. Then a leaf drifted to the ground, fallen from one of the plants. Another followed it, then another. Before long, it was raining leaves.

I'd heard about dead monsters poisoning the land they fell on, but I knew full well that wasn't the problem here. I continued staring at the dead plants until they were all bare, simply because I knew what was behind me, and I would rather stare at *anything* than that.



Wendy's corpse, lying next to the glowing circle that promised to send me home, wearing a victorious smile on its face.

The god of death came for all. He did not differentiate between ally or foe, and he did not stop at reaping the life from mere plants and monsters. Just like Miraculum had unexpectedly healed Toby, Nex had ended Wendy. From her hesitation and the way she'd failed to look me in the eye, not to mention her precharging the circle, she must have expected it.

Presumably Christine had met the same fate, if the monsters hadn't already killed her. What about the priests and Minoru? Had they gotten out of range? No chance...

"Idiot!" I yelled, breaking the silence. "Idiot, idiot, *idiot*! Wasn't there anything else you could have done?! Another spell you could have mentioned?! You... You... **Mir**ac—"

With my mana capacity already spent, there was no way I could squeeze out a cast of Miraculum. Would it have helped even if I could? How could one heal someone who was already dead? As my consciousness fled, I toppled over forward, straight toward the glowing circle.

Chapter 40: Home

"Hey, are you okay?" asked someone. "You blacked out for a moment there."

"What?" I asked, feeling completely and utterly discombobulated. "Where am I?"

"Okay, that's it. I'm calling for an ambulance," replied the other voice. "First you go off on a whole spiel about sparkly purple whirlwinds, then you faint, and now you don't even remember where you are?"

"I... Simon?"

"Oh good; you recognize me. Do you remember who *you* are?"

"I'm...back home?"

"No! We're still in the street! We were out drinking, remember?"

"No, not *that* home. I mean, this is Earth, right?"

Simon didn't respond, but I heard the beeping of his phone as he dialed a three-digit number.

"Stop that," I sighed, snatching it off him. "I'm fine. I've just had a rather interesting adventure. For a value of 'interesting' that's probably going to leave me needing years of therapy."

And there was *my* phone on the ground. And I was back in my original clothes too, despite the fact that I hadn't seen them since the first vomit incident.

"I *really* think you should go to the hospital," replied a concerned Simon.

"Look, I'll explain. Just... My room, okay?"

Simon shrugged but complied, following me as we made the journey back to our university dorm, a journey that had been so rudely interrupted little more than a week earlier. And there I explained exactly what I'd been through in that week.

"Yeah, let's circle back to your therapy comment," he responded. "A good psychologist sounds like a great plan right now."

"You really don't believe me?! You said I was passed out for a few seconds. How am I supposed to have dreamed up all this in those few seconds?"

"You aren't. You could have made it all up on the way back, or beforehand. Either you're messing with me—in which case, I *really* don't think this is funny, and you should have stopped at the purple sparkles—or else you are very seriously ill."

"Lux!" I shouted, holding out my hand, but nothing happened.

"You're not helping your case," he pointed out.

With a sigh, I pushed him out of my room. I knew that logically he was being perfectly reasonable, but everything had really happened. Hadn't it?

Some of my memories were starting to fray around the edges. Could the previous week really have been a dream? Nothing more than the side effects of too much rum?

No. And the rum was the *reason* I could be absolutely certain. Prefainting, I'd almost been drunk enough that I thought poking a sparkly purple vortex was a good idea. Now I was stone-cold sober, and I had been ever since waking up. If, as Simon claimed, it had only been a few seconds, where had the alcohol gone?

And, if it was all real, then I'd just killed Wendy, Christine, and Minoru. Perhaps I'd saved countless others, including the entire population of Odimere, but if I was the sort of person who could justify murdering a few to save many, I'd have never completely lost respect for the royal family in the way that I had. The whole second half of my adventure would have been different.

"I don't want to leave things like that..." I declared, mostly to myself. *I'd killed Wendy, Christine, and Minoru.* And two senior priests. Jane. Daniel—*Mary's father*, on the very day they'd been reunited.

Wendy must have considered that too. Unlike Christine, Wendy had never quite been on board with the involuntary sacrifice of others, but if she honestly believed Daniel was going to die anyway, and she wasn't *certain* Nex would kill them, then it wasn't sacrificing them. It was the opposite—the only chance she had of *saving* them—and it simply hadn't worked out. That didn't make me feel any

better, though. I was still the one who'd cast the spell. I was still the one who'd killed all of them.

And I'd been robbed of the chance to even apologize.

"Send me back!" I shouted. "That's not how this should end. Anypha? Bryax? Vena? Any others who are watching? *Send me back!*"

There came no response.

Logically, what reason was there to go back? Hadn't I done my job? I'd saved the kingdom. Glenda was still there and still knew the spell. What would going back even achieve? Was it worth it, if all I could do was retrieve Christine's corpse from beneath the pile of monsters and give the dead a proper burial? To apologize to Mary for killing her dad?

And yet... Some small part of me held out hope. Maybe Miraculum *could* raise the dead. Perhaps there was another spell on that level that could rewind time?

The memories continued to fade as I paced my room. All I needed to do was wait, and I was fairly sure I'd cease caring. It was already getting hard to picture the faces of Jane and Johanna, the priestesses I'd had little interaction with. But forgetting would cheapen the entire thing. It *wasn't fair*. Why should I be *allowed* to wash my hands of my own actions?

Just as the memories of that world were fading, my memories of this world were snapping into focus. At the point of returning, I couldn't even have said what day of the week it was. Now I'd not only remembered that, but also the set of lectures that awaited me tomorrow. A couple of bits of homework too. And as one set of faces faded, another set returned. I looked at the pictures on the wall. My parents. Grandparents. My girlfriend, Eve, whom I would never ever cheat on, no matter how much my memory was messed around with, or however many temptations the girls of the other world threw my way.

The logical thing to do would be to forget that other world. To prepare for tomorrow. To do homework, or to sleep. Of course, I did neither. I shifted my bed to the side, freeing up as much floor space as I could, and dug out a black marker pen.

This was totally going to cost me my deposit, but I continued anyway, drawing my own summoning circle onto the floor before my memories of it faded. I was reasonably sure I'd remembered it properly, but of course, nothing happened. Wendy had said something about charging it with mana, and either there was none here, or else without my divine blessings, I couldn't manipulate it.

By four in the morning, tiredness won out. Perhaps it wasn't even tiredness. The memories of the place had faded to the point I couldn't even picture *Mary's* face or imagine her voice. As much as I wanted to remain worked up, it was hard when the memories of the people I'd met were being methodically drained from my head, so I pushed my bed to cover up the circle as best as I could, and went to sleep.

"Lyrryuim fu," whispered a quiet voice, echoing oddly despite being right at the cusp of my hearing. "Ah, but I forget. You do not speak that tongue."

"Who's there?" I demanded, before spotting that I was no longer in my bed. Once again, I was in a plain of mist, but this time it was white, and the floor was a golden yellow. More like pure sand than ash. "Or a better question: Where am I?"

"I think the first question the most important," whispered the voice, sounding amused. "But I do appreciate your analytical nature. We did not choose incorrectly."

"You *chose*? Then you are one of the gods of *that* world?" I asked, looking around for the source of the voice. It didn't appear to come from any particular direction, simultaneously sounding impossibly distant yet whispered right in my ear.

Stephanie had said I wasn't special, that they could have summoned anyone, but this voice was saying I was *chosen*?

The voice giggled quietly. "I am Anypha, and indeed, many of my children call me a goddess. However, I have to say, I'm rather disappointed at how quickly you've forgotten my teaching."

"What teaching?" I asked, confused. I'd never heard anything about her beyond Mary's brief mention.

Which I could remember perfectly, come to think of it. Here, in

this place, the memories of both worlds remained in perfect clarity.

"My point exactly. Still, this is rare. It is normal for summoned heroes to form attachments to our world. To beg to stay beyond their time, that they may continue to enjoy positions of great wealth and power instead of returning to a mediocre existence back home. Never before has one who returned home prematurely gone so far in an attempt to return, though."

"Prematurely?" I asked, but in retrospect, wasn't that obvious? Had my job been done, the gods were supposed to have sent me back themselves. The fact that they hadn't implied that the task I'd been summoned to carry out hadn't yet been completed. "The kingdom is still in danger?"

"Not just the kingdom," came the whispered reply. "We don't play favorites with our children. We permitted the humans' summoning ritual not to save them alone, but to save *every* race."

"So it isn't over? If I don't return, the corruption will claim the continent?"

The goddess giggled once more. "You have made a good start, but there is much work still to do. Knowing that, do you still wish to return? Would you not rather remain here in comfort and safety than risk your life to protect those who wronged you? Our children can always summon another hero."

"Knowing that a whole continent is dying? No, I could never live with myself."

"And that is what makes you a hero. Not the power or the magic. Not riches or fame. It's love. The empathy, and the willingness to sacrifice yourself for others."

"Um... You're starting to sound rather cheesy."

That elicited a snort of laughter, loud enough to drive me to my knees.

"Sorry," apologized the goddess, reverting to a whisper. "I need to control my voice around you children. Making me laugh like that is dangerous. However, everything I said is true. You wish to return, to put yourself at risk, not because you'll be rewarded in any way, but to save those you care about. And some might argue that not all the targets of that care are deserving of it. You are fortunate Bryax

is...elsewhere; he would berate you most harshly for your hypocritical attitude toward the child of wind."

"I..." I mumbled, guessing she was talking about the way I'd told Wendy off for doing exactly what I wanted to do. "Okay, that's fair."

The mirthful goddess giggled again.

"Even so, what is there left to do?" I continued. "Haven't I already given the people the means to cleanse miasma? But the continent hasn't yet been saved?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not able to say exactly what you will face. There are, shall we say, *restrictions*, even on the likes of us. I can, however, openly warn you what will happen if you did *not* return. Our children are distressingly selfish, and already there are those that plot to acquire the priestess for themselves. They would attempt to seize her child to control her. Such an act will not end well."

"What?" I snapped, frowning. People would be that selfish? They'd doom themselves in an effort to control the means of cleansing miasma? Given the warning, they'd even go so far as to take Mary hostage?

Never mind the continent—this had just gotten personal.

"I ask you one more time, dear hero. Do you still wish to return? Will you put yourself in danger?"

"Yes!"

"Will you accept the responsibility that comes with your power? Can you choose when and where to use it? Choose who lives and who dies?"

"I... Of course I can. *Everyone* will live."

The goddess giggled again. "If only reality were so simple," she commented. "Very well. The restrictions I mentioned forbid me from moving you between worlds myself, so I shall give you my final blessing: the ability to move yourself. There will be side effects from such a gift, but that cannot be avoided, and I foresee you turning them to your advantage. Return, and if you want to fulfill that promise, remember my teachings. But one last thing—as much as I can say without attracting unwanted attention: Beware the Fallen, and those who would follow them into the abyss."

"The who?" I asked, but the only response was the world peeling apart.

I woke up again, lying in the middle of Wendy's summoning circle. Or antisummoning circle, perhaps. Banishing circle? What was the correct term if the same circle could be used for both summoning and banishing? And why was I here, anyway? She said she'd given me the ability to teleport myself, so why was I already here? Had I done it subconsciously? And what side effects did I need to worry about?

The first time I'd been brought to this world, I'd ended up with my face a few inches away from that of a princess. This time, it was a few inches away from Wendy's corpse.

I didn't even blink.

What were those teachings Anypha was talking about? And what was that about the "Fallen"? From the way she pronounced it, she obviously hadn't been talking about the deceased. For that matter, I'd just had a personal conversation with a goddess, and I'd barely been bothered. Even divinity hadn't broken through my melancholy. Despite the mountains of monster corpses that surrounded me, this battle felt like a complete loss.

And then a little nugget of light finally beat its way through my thick skull.

I'd declared I wanted to save everyone. Anypha hadn't declared it impossible; she'd said I needed to remember her teachings. The only teaching I was aware of was her one quoted sentence from the story told by Mary. Magic could heal anything.

Then could it even heal death?

I'd been about to cast Miraculum, and only my overtaxed mana capacity had prevented me. Had it succeeded, would it have brought Wendy back to life?

Just like my time in this world had purged me of alcohol back home, my time back home had allowed my mana capacity to recover.

"**Miraculum**!"

Nothing happened beyond the usual purging of miasma. The corpses of the monster horde were purified, and the land cleansed,

but Wendy remained dead.

But it was too soon to give up. If Miraculum wasn't enough, I just needed to go bigger.

Chapter 41: Myth

It took far too long for me to locate Christine's body under the mountain of monsters. If not for my vision spells and the sensory enhancements from body strengthening, I probably never would have. Thankfully, I did have those things, so I trudged up the road alone with Wendy's corpse over one shoulder and Christine's over the other. One in perfect condition, the other torn to shreds.

I didn't have to travel far up the road before I came across bags and containers, obviously thrown from the carriage in an attempt to lighten the load. A little farther on was one of the seats, apparently broken off by raw strength, followed by other bits of the interior.

Once the easily removable bits of structure had run out, the next thing I found was Minoru. The humans had thrown the demon from the carriage, presumably to improve their own chances. Had all four of them agreed? I could imagine Johanna doing it, but she'd been driving. The actual act must have been carried out by one of the others.

As expected, Minoru was dead.

That they'd done such a thing pissed me off. If only I knew which of the priests were responsible, I might have thrown *them* out instead, but I didn't, so for now there wasn't anything I could do. The callous act hadn't even bought the priests anything; the carriage had only made it another hundred yards up the road before my spell had hit. The horse was lying on its side, tangled in the harness. Johanna was dead in the driver's seat, the others all dead inside. It was a few minutes' work to add Wendy, Christine, and Minoru to the pile and cut the horse free, running up the dirt track while pulling the skeletal carriage myself.

The city gates were closed, nervous soldiers standing along the walls, sparsely enough that "lining" the walls felt like a gross exaggeration. With the bulk of the army up north, this was likely the

best defense they could manage.

"Open the gate!" I called.

"The city is sealed by royal decree," someone from the wall shouted back. From the fancy plume sticking out of his helmet, he was either a commanding officer or a person with a rather interesting fashion sense. "If you want to flee the monsters, go around."

"There are no monsters," I answered. "The flood is over, so open up."

"I find that doubtful, but even if it's true, I have my orders. Until I'm ordered otherwise, the gate remains shut."

"Oh, for goodness' sake," I muttered. "**Maius Terrae Columna**!"

In a testament to its construction, the gate did not open, despite the pillars of earth that erupted beneath it. Enchantments flickered but held, and the gates and walls groaned but did not bend or break.

A dozen archers took aim. Perhaps I'd been a little hasty, there—surely it wouldn't take *that* long to confirm they weren't actually under attack and reopen the city—but to say I was in a bit of a bad mood would be like saying the sea was a bit damp. My patience would be best measured in femtoseconds.

The archers fired. "**Maius Scutum**," I answered, and they all bounced off. "Please stop making me waste mana, or I'll get angry, and then you'll see firsthand the difference between how I treat people whose names I know and those I've never seen before."

A burst of mana up on the wall suggested the soldiers had found a mage. I glanced up and began preparing a fireball of my own.

The mana on the wall cut out.

"Thomas?" the mage yelled down.

"Oh? Do I know you?"

I peered up, but the face didn't seem particularly familiar. I wasn't acquainted with any soldiers, as far as I knew.

"Yes! From the castle? You got me fired from my cushy court mage job!"

"Oh, *you* were the fourth mage! Sorry, I didn't recognize you without the robe."

"What the hell are you doing, talking to the enemy?!" yelled the leader of the guard. "Attack!"

"Yeah, but no. That's the damn *hero*. I've seen him angry, and frankly, I'd rather eat my boots than attack him."

The wall fell silent. A dozen bows suddenly found themselves pointed in different directions.

"This discussion is nice and all, but I'm in a hurry. Open the gate, or I'll open it for you."

"I don't know what sort of hero you're supposed to be, but that doesn't give you the right to order us around," replied the captain, reminding me that my existence was still partially a secret.

"Fine, I'll do it myself," I muttered, peering at the gate. I could just punch it, but given that it had withstood an enhanced earth pillar, I didn't fancy my chances no matter how much mana I poured into body strengthening. Likewise, while I probably could smash it down with magic, I needed to conserve my mana for my big resurrection attempt.

When I'd first arrived, looking out of the castle window for the first time, I'd marveled at the height of the walls. Now, they somehow didn't seem quite so impressive. A touch of body strengthening, and I could leap them.

I couldn't carry the carriage, though, so I still needed to get the damn gate open. Thankfully, the winch was pretty damn obvious, and the defense was laughably weak. A few soldiers tried to stab me, but battle aura let me simply grab their spears by the heads, yank them forward, and then punch the men in the face.

"This... This is an act of *war*!" yelled the red-faced captain.

"Yeah, yeah. Cry me a river," I muttered, grabbing the carriage and pulling it through the open gate. "Feel free to close it again once I'm through, if it makes you feel any better."

Thankfully, none of the guards pursued me, although I had a suspicion I'd face the consequences of forcing my way through later. I simply found it hard to care.

The streets of the capital were deserted, nor did my mana sight detect anyone cowering in their homes. The city might not have been much by Earth standards, but I was still impressed the entire

place had been emptied so quickly. Where had everyone gone? If the evacuation was complete, why was it still defended?

Nah, that one was obvious. If it wasn't defended at all, the monsters would quickly catch up with the evacuees. They must have planned to use the convenient big walls to hold the flood here. Although even then, doubtless enough of the monsters would simply go around to continue being a threat.

My house was untouched, but contained neither Glenda nor Mary. It wasn't them I was here for, anyway; it was the artifact I'd been loaned by the archbishop. How was I even supposed to use it? Was wearing it sufficient, or did I need to do something more complicated to activate it?

Nothing for it but to try.

With the tiara atop my head, body reinforcement switched on and battle aura applied to my throat, a mana potion in hand and the seven corpses laid out in front of me, I was as prepared as I could possibly be. The first time I'd cast Miraculum, I had focused the entire thing on Mary and hadn't purged any miasma at all. Now I wanted to do something similar.

"**Maius Miraculum**."

The first syllable was enough to remind me that Wendy had demanded I cast this spell *outside* the city. She hadn't been wrong. The force of the spell was literally explosive, not merely demolishing my house but sending lumps of wood and stone flying high into the air.

I didn't much care. Yes, the neighboring properties didn't survive unscathed, but I knew they'd been evacuated. There was no one around to put in any danger. More important was the effect of my spell on the dead. Despite my desires, I could tell that great waves of mana had rolled out in all directions, away from my chosen targets.

Nothing seemed to change. The horrific wounds Christine had sustained from the monsters remained. All seven were still pale.

"Hey!" I yelled, running to Wendy first and looking for any signs of life. "Can you hear me?"

She didn't respond, but despite her pallor, I could see that she

was breathing shallowly.

Minoru gave one of her usual half purr, half snores as she curled up into a ball.

The tension that had led me to force my way into the city departed in an instant. It turned out that tension was also all that was keeping me upright. Like a snapped rubber band, I collapsed, joining the people I'd just saved on the shattered wooden floor.

"**Maius Miraculum**."

"What the hell?" asked King George as the mythical spell washed over the train of refugees a considerable distance from Odimere.

"Master! That was Master's voice!" excitedly exclaimed Mary, who was riding a horse as part of the king's group. A knight sat behind her holding the reins, while her mother was on another horse alongside. The king had put together a well-guarded, high-priority party—naturally including himself—and all of its members were on horses and had traveled miles ahead of the rest of the train of refugees.

The fact that a spell cast by the hero was audible to the group was therefore rather surprising.

"The hero has joined the evacuation?" he asked, turning to a mage on another nearby horse. "I thought you said he was fighting the horde south of the city?"

"He was, when last I looked, but I can't scry while we're traveling at this speed," replied the mage.

"There's no sign of pursuit and no alerts from the rearguard," said an older knight, the leader of the royal guard, Siegfried Kingsblade. "It's safe to slow down briefly."

The order rippled out, the group slowing to a trot so that the scryer could concentrate on his magic without needing to worry about his kidneys being jolted into his lungs.

"Well?" asked King George some minutes later, growing impatient.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. I, um, can't find them."

"What do you mean, you can't find them?"

"I mean, I can't find the horde. It's...*gone*."

"How can it be *gone*?! You said there were tens of thousands of monsters!"

"Remember that it was apparently hidden from us to begin with," said Siegfried. "Perhaps something about this horde renders them invisible to us beyond a certain distance."

"Perhaps," replied the mage, his eyes still blank as they focused on visions of far away. "No, wait. What's this?"

"What? What do you see?" demanded the king.

"The horde. I've found them, right where they were the last time."

"Then why did it take so long? But no matter. Now that you've found them, what's going on?"

"Even if they've remained where they were, *we've* traveled a substantial distance," pointed out the mage, still staring at nothing. "But the reason I missed them is that they aren't moving."

"So, they still haven't reached Odimere? Good. The entire evacuation should be a success, then."

"No, you misunderstand. I didn't say they aren't *advancing*. I said they aren't *moving*."

"What are you implying?" asked Siegfried.

The mage peered for a few moments more. "I'm pretty sure they're all dead."

"*How?!*" exclaimed the king, radiating disbelief. "Are you saying the hero slew them all?"

"It's hard to tell from this distance. I don't see any activity at all."

"Call a halt!" shouted Siegfried, and the party moved from a trot to a full stop. "Order the rearguard to dispatch scouts to Odimere and the location of the flood."

"This isn't possible," said King George. "The hero never finished his training. How could he possibly have defeated a horde of that size?"

"The positioning is strange," replied the mage, his vision having grown a little clearer now that the party had stopped moving. "They aren't clustered around one point, as I would expect had a single person been fighting them. I don't see any widespread damage to the landscape either. That's not what I'd predict from a violent battle

of that magnitude. It's more like the entire horde simply died mid-charge."

"Is there a spell that can do that?"

"No, of course not, or else we'd..." started the mage, before pausing, having remembered the existence of Miraculum. Had someone asked a week earlier if a spell existed that purged miasma, he'd have instantly answered no to that too. "Or perhaps there is," he continued, shuddering. "If Thomas can cast Miraculum, perhaps he can also cast Nex."

"What now?" sighed the king, having spotted the shudder.

"Sorry, it's just that given the nature of the myth in which Nex is mentioned, it's hard not to imagine the effect of him casting it in the middle of Odimere."

Chapter 42: Judgment

I opened my eyes to a rather familiar ceiling. "I thought I'd been banished from the castle?" I commented rhetorically, recognizing my old room.

"Master! You're awake!" shouted a voice I recognized with even greater alacrity than the ceiling. "You've been sleeping all day!"

"I...think I did a bit too much."

"You blew up our house!"

"Ah, yes. Sorry."

Mary giggled while I struggled to sit up and look at her. "I don't really know what's going on, but it seems like you saved lots of people," she said. "What's one house in comparison?"

She was back in her maid uniform—the lower-quality one, rather than the castle's uniform—but had added a black fabric choker to her outfit. Thankfully, a quick surreptitious check revealed no mana interactions from it whatsoever. "I'm surprised to see you still around," I commented. "Didn't you want to live with your parents?"

"Of course!" she agreed. "But if I did that, who would look after you? How many times have you knocked yourself out in the past week? I can't fight like Christine, I'm not as intelligent or talented as Wendy, and I'm not even a particularly good healer, but I'm every bit as important as them all. Without me, you'd have nothing to eat, no clothes to wear, and no one to carry you back to bed each time you knock yourself unconscious. You'd be utterly helpless!"

"Uh, I don't think I'd go quite *that* far," I grumbled.

Mary grinned shamelessly. "Thank you for everything," she said, curtsying. "I promise you I've thought about it properly, and staying with you is what *I* want to do, so no arguing or trying to kick me out."

"I'm not going to argue. I *want* you to stay; it would just be selfish to expect it of you. But if you're back in your right mind, do

you think you can finally stop calling me ‘master’?”

“Nope!”

“Oh well. I tried. Anyway, what’s going on? Why am I in the castle?”

“Because you blew up our house!”

I gave that the consideration it was due and didn’t see any way I could argue.

“How are Wendy, Christine, and the others?”

“Uh...” answered Mary, which was not a good response.

“I saw Wendy breathing! And Minoru was snoring!”

“Yes. Wendy and Minoru are fine. So are Dad and Tony. I’ve seen them all.”

“Christine, Jane, and Johanna?”

Mary didn’t answer.

“What happened to them?!”

“Like I said, I don’t really know what’s going on,” answered Mary. “It would be better for you to ask Wendy. She’s being debriefed right now. And now that you’re up, I need to prepare you for your audience with King George.”

With a sense of foreboding, I glanced over at the seat on which Mary always piled my clothes. My fears were confirmed when I saw the cravat sitting on top. Of all the things to survive our collapsing house, why did it have to be *that*?

“I thought he didn’t want anything to do with me?” I grumbled, but without much hope.

“Stop whining and get your nightclothes off. Speaking of which, who do you think got them *on*? You were in your armor when you knocked yourself out this time.”

“You are completely and utterly shameless, aren’t you?”

“You have only yourself to blame. You’re the one that insisted on getting my original personality back.”

“Nah, you’ve always behaved like that, even before I freed you.”

“Maybe, but back then there was more chance of me listening to you when you told me off,” she smirked. “Now you’re stuck with me.”

“The scary thing is, I think I could get used to this,” I sighed as I let her dress me. “Wow, do people really wear this sort of thing?

Deliberately?”

“You look dashing!” pouted Mary.

“I look... I don’t know what I look like. I don’t have any words for this. Best I can do is ‘Victorian,’ but I have no idea how that will translate.”

“Old-fashioned?” asked Mary, tilting her head.

“Close enough, I guess.”

“How can it be old-fashioned? This is the *cutting edge* of fashion!”

Our banter was interrupted by a knock at the door, which was quickly opened by Mary.

“How is...?” started a male voice from outside. “Oh, he’s awake and dressed. Good. Then His Majesty shall see him immediately. Please follow me.”

“Take care,” requested Mary, making a last-minute adjustment to the cravat. “See if you can go an entire hour without knocking yourself unconscious.”

“I’m not *that* bad,” I complained, stepping out of the room.

The visitor was a tall knight, face hidden by a helm. “So, you’re the summoned hero. I believe this is our first time meeting.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I commented. “That armor makes it hard to tell you apart.”

“On the contrary: Those who rely only on faces for recognition will find themselves fooled by even simple enchantments and illusions. You can tell by the emblems on the breastplate, helm, or shield who I *claim* to be, but voice, build, and mannerisms are all things you must learn to pay attention to.”

Well, that was nice, but he still hadn’t introduced himself... Instead, he simply led me back to the throne room in silence.

Once again, King George sat on the central throne, the slightly smaller throne to his side left empty.

“And so, despite my hopes, we meet again,” sighed the king. “One must wonder why you are still here, though. Our kingdom is saved. Why haven’t the gods sent you home already?”

I found it hard to judge the king’s mood. Whether it was resignation or anger, the best I could do was be certain that he wasn’t happy to see me. After our last meeting, I’d given serious

thought to disposing of this king and taking over myself, and I had the feeling his mood here would only strengthen that desire. Alas, I still wasn't strong enough. Sure, Nex would let me "win," but if I relied on that, there wouldn't be anyone left to rule. It would completely defeat the point of getting rid of him.

Perhaps it was time for a name-drop? It wouldn't make him any less unhappy, but it would very likely make him less inclined to take his frustration out on me.

"Anypha said the gods didn't play favorites, and I needed to save every race, not just you lot," I answered.

"You...have spoken to our gods?" he asked, suddenly nervous.

"Only Anypha, and only briefly," I answered, happy at the response to invoking her name. "Obviously, I can't say exactly what was discussed."

"No matter," he said with a shake of his head. "That's not what you are here to talk about. Rather, I've called you here to give an accounting of your crimes."

"What the hell? I saved your damn asses from a horde of monsters, and you want to accuse me of *crimes*?"

"That there are mitigating circumstances is why you are here, and not in a public square with a noose around your neck," he snapped back.

"Fine. What crimes?"

"The assault on Odimere and its subsequent invasion. The theft of Vena's Grace. Destruction of property valued at thousands of mithril coins. The murders of Bishop Johanna, Priestess Jane, and Lady Christine Standler."

"Christine is dead?!" I yelled, latching onto that last point.

"Why does that surprise you? You carried her corpse from the site of her death all the way to Odimere. You can hardly claim ignorance."

"But... But I *brought them back*. I entered Odimere and used Vena's Grace to resurrect them!"

King George stared intently, unblinking. "You're telling the truth," he admitted at last, relaxing slightly. "You're legitimately surprised. Then that fills in the last part of the puzzle. I think we all know why

those three were not saved, and perhaps even why the first casting of Miraculum did nothing to purge miasma from the kingdom."

"No, we don't!" I argued. "Or at least, *I* don't. Christine could have been too badly injured by monsters for the spell to work, but why those two priestesses?"

"Christine did not receive any fatal wounds from the monsters. Yes, had the fight continued, she'd have been in danger of bleeding out, but in the end, that wasn't what killed her. Would it help if I informed you that Jane was the one to throw Minoru from the carriage, at Johanna's urging?"

"Yes," I admitted after a moment. "Not that I had any idea who did that until you said."

Then the reason Christine was dead was nothing to do with the monsters, but because I still blamed her for Mary. She'd been doing her best against the horde, fighting desperately to save every last life she could despite knowing full well she'd die in the process, but apparently, somewhere inside myself that was still outweighed by her taking part in an assassination plot that hadn't even worked.

Did she really deserve that fate?

Or, of course, there was the horrible alternative. I'd been unconscious the entire time and had no idea what had happened between casting the spell and waking up. Certainly enough time had passed for all these people to return from their evacuation, find me, and move me to the castle. Perhaps I *had* brought Christine back, but someone else had decided it would be more convenient if she was dead. Hopefully not; I couldn't think of any sort of end such a move would achieve beyond making me feel guilty. If it had been a move by the king, Minoru would have made a far better strategic target.

"What am I to do with you?" sighed the king. "You have fulfilled the role for which you were summoned, but in a manner that cost me my family, and you have not returned to your world. You have defeated a miasmic flood, but we believe that you were the one to cause it in the first place. You have no respect for our laws; you are willing to trample over a city and do untold damage simply to save a single life."

Once again, the king showed that he simply had different priorities to me. I had some regrets, but valuing lives over property was not one of them. Nor was the manner in which I'd "saved" the kingdom. Speaking of which...

"Did Maius Miraculum purify miasma?"

"Yes. Everything within a hundred-mile radius. Congratulations: You took a substantial bite out of the corrupted lands and pushed the border far from Odimere. And I suppose, in the end, that leads me to my decision. Hero Thomas Smith, I hereby banish you from the kingdom of Ricousian, from now into perpetuity. Your very existence here invites instability. The gods desire for you to save the other races? Then go and save them, and stay far away from us. You may take Wendy and Mary with you, if only because I fear you tearing apart my kingdom in your wrath should anything happen to them here. Please also take...*that*. I cannot bear to look at it."

"You people summoned me, *deliberately*, and then lied to me constantly, trying to steer me into doing your bidding. I save you all anyway, and now you have the gall to complain that I saved you in the *wrong way*?" I complained, ignoring the final "gift" because I had no idea what he was talking about. "I suppose it doesn't matter. That single cast of Maius Miraculum has probably solved your immediate food crisis, and you have a priestess who's learned the spell and can hopefully pass it on, so I guess I don't have anything left to do here. May I leave?"

"No. First, take *that*. Get it in here!"

A door at the back of the throne room opened and a very familiar young lady walked in, tailed by a knight. She was dressed in rags, and the hair she considered so precious had been reduced to a buzz cut—probably to mask the damage I'd done to it—but her features were unchanged. Her face was instantly recognizable, despite the out-of-place expression it was wearing. Her previous sharp gaze was nowhere to be seen, replaced by an utterly blank expression. Her eyes were empty and focused on nothing, and she walked in complete silence, not giving so much as a glance to anyone in the room.

The cause of her condition was obvious enough. The former

princess had a metal collar around her neck, and subvocally casting Maius Omnium Visus confirmed it was active.

King George didn’t even look at her, completely ignoring the poor girl.



Chapter 43: A New Journey

"I'm...surprised," I admitted. "I had expected King Edward to simply hide her from me, rather than following through. And even if he hadn't, I expected you to countermand him. And even if you didn't, isn't acclimatization supposed to take weeks or months? It's been, what, a single week?"

"I'm not so shameless as to annul the edicts of my father for purely personal reasons. He never did anything without a rational motive, and given his order to process her as fast as possible—even at the expense of her sanity—he must have had a damn good one."

Stephanie remained silent, not reacting at all to the conversation.

"Nope. I *really* don't want to deal with this," I declared, reinforcing my innards with body strengthening. "**Miraculum**."

Stephanie continued to not react despite the fine rain of dust falling from the vaulted ceiling.

"Well? Back to normal?" I asked.

She didn't respond, or even look at me, giving no indication whatsoever that she'd heard my question. She gave no indication that she'd heard the *spell*, despite it shaking the entire castle.

Sure enough, my mana sight showed her collar still active, the spell having apparently achieved nothing. Why?

"Please, just leave and stop toying with my sister's corpse in front of me," ordered the king. "We've already established that your spell doesn't work on those you don't feel deserve it, whatever you rationally think or desire."

"Simply touch the collar here and force a little mana into it to claim ownership," said the knight.

"No way. Take her back and undo it. Even if I can't undo it instantly, you can still do it properly."

"Were you not paying attention when I said this was done to her at the expense of her sanity?" snapped back King George, who

seemed to be trying very hard not to scream. “This wasn’t done carefully enough to be reversible. You demanded my sister be turned into *that*, so take it. If you refuse, I’ll simply have it disposed of. I have no intention of letting a doll with the face of my sister walk around my kingdom.”

I wordlessly complied, injecting mana into her collar to very little noticeable effect. Her empty gaze simply rotated toward me as she waited silently for her next instruction.

“Sorry,” I told her. “I don’t think my stay here has turned out how I hoped any more than how your parents hoped.”

“Hah. So *that* gets an apology, but not me?” complained the king. “Whatever. That was my last point of business, so be gone.”

I bowed politely—he was still a king, after all, and it was kinda true I’d screwed up his family’s plans—and then left. He still didn’t get an apology, of course; I was rather angry at the way he kept referring to his sister as a thing instead of a person. Stephanie followed wordlessly once I prompted her.

Wendy and Mary were waiting outside, heavy packs on their backs and a third on the floor that was obviously intended for me. The lack of a fourth implied they weren’t expecting Stephanie to be joining us. Wendy peered at her with obvious surprise.

“We have a lot of things to talk about, but let’s save it till we’re on the road,” she said. “Damn king isn’t even giving us a carriage, although I suppose we wouldn’t have much to put in one, given that you blew up most of our stuff.”

“And after I’d just been shopping too,” complained Mary. “Now I won’t get a chance to see you in the other outfits I bought.”

“There were *more* outfits?!”

“Of course! You can’t wear the same thing every day.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get to see him all dressed up in demon fashion soon enough,” said Wendy.

“Demon fashion? It’s already decided we’re going to the Ti’zharr Empire?” I asked, unsure why they were making that sort of decision without me.

“Not as such, no, but I know Minoru will be heading back there, and you’re going to insist on escorting her, so...no, but also yes.”

"Fair enough," I agreed, being unable to refute that. "Where is Minoru, anyway?"

"Waiting for us outside the north gate. She's been kicked out of the city already."

"Oh. Best we hurry, then."

"This is weird without Christine..." I commented ten minutes later as we walked through the city. Apparently, we weren't being kicked out completely empty-handed, because Mary had found Stephanie a pack of her own and some supplies to fill it with.

"Frankly, it's a miracle *any* of us are still alive," said Wendy. "Christine would consider her death defending Odimere a great honor."

"True, but if that dream dragon is to be believed, the horde was my fault to start with."

"And if you hadn't been here, she'd probably have ended up dead at the hands of the demons instead. There's no point bogging yourself down with what-ifs. What happened, happened."

"Speaking of... Are you okay, Stephanie? Sorry, I really didn't intend for things to end up this way."

Stephanie didn't react.

"Master?" chimed in Mary. "If you want my firsthand advice, saying things like that will only make her feel bad."

"Urk... Stupid mind control. Fine. Stephanie, you haven't done anything wrong. And you're doing a great job at, uh, carrying luggage."

As before, there was no reaction.

"I don't think she feels *anything*," I pointed out. "Nor is she doing anything of her own accord. She's behaving like a robot..."

"A golem, yes..." agreed Wendy, the translation apparently shifting "robot" into something she recognized. "I wonder if they used the old version of the collar, which only responds to orders? Dunno where they'd have dug one out from, but her behavior is inexplicable otherwise. Even if she'd resisted acclimatization to the bitter end, which would explain the lack of emotion, she shouldn't need to be explicitly told to do every small thing. I can imagine if the former king had ordered them to process her as quickly as possible,

even at the expense of her sanity, they might have used an old collar to reduce the need for lengthy acclimatization."

It was a few minutes more until we passed through the north gate. None of the guards looked like those who'd been manning the south gate when I'd broken my way in, but they nonetheless all seemed to know who we were, and weren't overjoyed to see us. Then again, we did have the broken former princess in our party. It stood to reason the guards would recognize her.

Outside, not only Minoru was waiting, but also Archbishop Alexander. He was standing, but leaning against his carriage for support.

"I'm sorry. It seems my actions have caused you some trouble," he said.

"You mean the tiara? Without it, there's no way I could have cast Maius Miraculum. I couldn't have pushed back the corrupted lands or saved the lives that I did."

"True, but that doesn't change the fact the king held it against you," he said.

"You should just declare him your saintess, and then it won't be a problem," suggested Mary.

Wendy snorted.

"You laugh, but it's not the worst idea," said Alexander. "He certainly has the necessary abilities, and I'm sure we could cram the requisite scriptures into his head quickly enough. The biggest obstacle is that appointing a saintess requires the agreement of all eight archbishops."

"Um, I can't help but feel that there's another rather fundamental requirement that I'm lacking," I pointed out.

"Nah, that's not important," dismissed Alexander. "There was once an attempt to decree that archbishops needed to be male, and Anypha expressed her extreme displeasure by turning more than half of the upper echelons of the church into gerbils. Very big on gerbils, that one, but also on gender equality. As you might expect, no one has tried to enforce gender requirements on church roles since."

"Huh..." I commented, not having anything else to add.

"Anyway, I didn't come out here just to apologize. Before you leave, I need to give you the full translation of that Infernal text."

"Oh? You've translated it? Shame it's a bit late..."

"Well, that's the thing," said Alexander, frowning. "The precise translation would be 'Your continued pointless defiance amuses me. Prove you're worthy of my time, endure my trials, and cling to life, for I am coming for you myself.'"

"That's, uh, quite a lot longer than the text we gave you," I hazarded.

"That's just how Infernal is," explained Alexander. "For example, defiance is considered pointless by default. You have to explicitly say 'defiance that is not pointless' if that's what you mean."

"Then in what way was I defying him?"

"That wasn't part of the text I was given."

"So, the short version is that the miasmic flood wasn't what was coming," said Wendy. "Rather, it was a trial that the dragon *wanted* Thomas to survive to prove that he was worthy of being dealt with in person. We should expect a dragon—or worse, something pretending to be a dragon that speaks Infernal."

"Did you give that translation to King George, by any chance?" I asked.

"Yes. I apologize, but that was not a secret I could keep."

"It's no wonder he was in such a hurry to kick me out of the country, then."

"And you don't have a problem with this?" I asked Minoru, who was listening quietly. "Should you really be bringing me into demon territory?"

"Those are my orders," she replied, grinning like a cat who had just been caught with her paw in the cream and didn't give a damn.

"Uh... Your expression *really* doesn't match your voice."

"I heard what happened after I passed out," she explained. "What those priestesses did... You saved my life. I'm hardly going to betray kindness like that."

"Ah. So you know you shouldn't really, but you're using your orders as an excuse," I guessed.

"You're not supposed to say it out loud!" complained the catgirl.

“But seriously, no one will mind, as long as you keep your distance from any major cities. And I owe Wendy my thanks as well; had she not been the first to wake, your effort might have been wasted. When the king’s party turned up, I believe they gave serious thought to simply killing us all.”

“Of course,” I said, rolling my eyes. “They’d just acquired a large area of purified land and the opportunity to control the means of making more. I’m surprised they didn’t.”

“Mary and Glenda were part of the king’s party, and of course Mary stuck to you like glue from the moment they arrived,” said Wendy. “Pissing off Mary would trigger her mother, and of course I’d have defended you. But really, I think the main reason they didn’t was because they weren’t confident you wouldn’t wake up and hit them with Nex the moment they laid hands on you.”

“I’m not sure if I’m amazing at this hero business or a complete liability,” I sighed. “Whatever. We’re done here. Let’s head to the Ti’zharr Empire!”

No one moved.

“Uh, Minoru? I have no idea how to get to the Ti’zharr Empire from here. Would you mind leading the way?”

Wendy snorted again. “You may not be the hero we wanted, but I’m pretty darn sure you’re the hero we needed. Don’t ever change.”

And so ended the first stage of my otherworldly adventure. As much as I hoped the next would go a little more smoothly, well, I was starting to suspect my luck simply didn’t run that way.

Epilogue

Simon stared past the police tape that blocked off his best friend's room. The inside was neat, but still showed obvious signs of a police search. In particular, the bed had been pushed aside, revealing an intricate and highly ominous circular pattern carefully drawn onto the floor.

"Dammit. Why did I ever leave him alone?" he asked rhetorically.

Anypha had mentioned side effects, and one was the loss of the frozen time. No longer could Thomas spend his time in the other world without those he left behind noticing his absence.

"I think you should be more open-minded," said the girl standing next to him, who bore a striking resemblance to certain photos given pride of place on Thomas's desk. "If he was suffering a psychotic break and wandered out on his own, why didn't a single CCTV camera pick him up? These dorms have them on every exit."

"You think he was telling the *truth*?"

"When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

"No need to quote Arthur Conan Doyle at me. This could still be a prank."

"Thomas wouldn't do that," replied Eve with complete certainty. "He'd never worry us or waste police time like this."

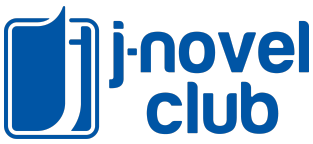
"So he really is trying to save an alien world all on his own...?"

"On his own?" replied Eve, glancing down at her sketchbook, into which she'd carefully copied a certain magical circle. "Not if I have any say in the matter."

After all, Anypha had also mentioned that such side effects might work to Thomas's advantage.







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