

HALEY AND THE MIRACULOUS POTION

Haley and Nana #5

M.C.A. Hogarth

Haley Landry, Level 9 Questgiver, was lolling in bed under a mound of afghans when the house—now an enchanted inn—sounded the door chime. For a very long moment, she considered staying right where she was... it was hard work to get out from under this many blankets. But with a sigh she pushed herself into the chill of her room, scrubbing her arms when they went up in instant goosebumps. “Brrr. Maybe I shouldn’t have left the windows open,” she told the house, “but it’s so much fun to have it cold when you’re warm!”

The house drew a few snowflakes on the walls in beads of light and animated them drifting downward.

“Yes, just like that. Except it doesn’t snow here! Well, at least, only once in a decade, or so Nana says.” Haley closed the windows on the damp chill, shrugged a robe on over her pajamas, and headed downstairs to see who was visiting so early in the morning. As she padded down the steps, the house drew curlicues of light along the walls, skating them across the ceiling and twining them down so that Haley’s first footstep on the ground floor landed in the center of a spiral. The light exploded dramatically away from the ball of her foot, scattering streaks across the wooden floor, and Haley laughed. “You’re more excited about this than I am!” She patted the wall. “But it’s fun, and I like it.”

Another spiral zipped around her hand, and then the light faded, leaving her to the mundane duties of a hostess. She crossed the empty common room to the front door, made sure her robe was belted, and opened it. “Hi, welcome to Haley and Nana’s! We’re not open yet, unless you want to use one of our rooms... ah... do I know you?”

The girl on the doorstep was maybe a few years younger than Haley and would have been casting-call beautiful had it not been for her pugnacious look. That made it easier for Haley to live with the bright blonde hair, pert nose, and summer blue eyes that she used to wish she’d had instead of her mousy blondish-brown hair and sort-of brownish eyes.

“You know my brother,” said this angry paragon.

“Your br... oh, are you Billy’s sister?”

“Yes.”

Just that. Haley stared at her, waiting for more, and more was not forthcoming. The girl was glaring at her like there was something wrong. A bird sang in the corner tree, which gave the scene a surreal quality. “Can... I help you?”

“My mom said I should ask for a job here.”

“She did?”

“I told her I didn’t want a job.”

"All right?" Haley could not, for the life of her, figure out what this girl wanted her to say. What she did know was that leaving the door open was giving the wet winter breeze a chance to caper inside, and she was getting gooseflesh under her sleeves and up her neck. "Why don't you come in and have breakfast?"

"I've already eaten."

"A snack, then."

"I'm not hungry."

"I'll make us coffee and if you don't want any, I'll do the drinking." Haley opened the door all the way. "Come on in."

The girl swept in with the kind of polished grace that suggested years of ballet classes, and Haley led her to the kitchen while wrestling with envy and a growing disbelief that anyone so pretty could be so grumpy. What on earth did this girl have to be grumpy about? What had Billy said about her? That his sister believed the aliens' imposition of the system on Earth was proof that God had abandoned them. Haley guessed if that was her take on things, she'd be unhappy too, and nurtured the tiny sprout of compassion that sprang up in response. She made coffee, concentrating on imbuing it with all the welcome she could muster, and scrounged up yesterday's loaf of bread. It was already stale, but toasting should revive it, or at least mask its imperfections. She brought two mugs to the table, then set the cutting board on the counter and started slicing. "So what's your name?"

"Jennifer. *Not* Jenny."

Haley didn't want to touch *that* with a ten-foot pole. How many chips was this girl carrying on her shoulder? Enough to cover both of them, it seemed. "Mine's Haley—"

"I know." Maybe the girl finally realized how awful she was being, because she added, "Billy talks about you all the time." That was... sort of promising. Except it went downhill from there. "Miss Haley this. Miss Haley that. Why can't I be as nice or interesting as Miss Haley."

Haley cringed over the bread, finished cutting the second slice. The toaster, rehabilitated with a fire scroll, accepted her offering. This was the first time Haley could remember being grateful that the timer no longer worked, because it meant she had an excuse to hover at the counter. "I'm not actually very interesting. Do you take sugar and cream?"

"I don't drink coffee. It's the devil's drink."

Startled, Haley said, "The minister drinks coffee!"

"Well, he shouldn't." The girl jerked her chair away from the table and dropped into it with an audible thump. "It's a drug, and people are proud of abusing it. 'Oh, I can't start my day without coffee, ha ha,' 'don't talk to me before I've had my morning coffee,' 'I have caffeine in my veins instead of blood.' It's disgusting."

Haley found herself rewinding the last few years of her life, looking for instances where she'd excused herself for having a caffeine addiction. "I... like chocolate more than coffee, honestly. Please don't tell me chocolate is bad."

Jennifer squinted at her—maybe checking for sarcasm? When she didn't detect any, her shoulders loosened. "As long as you're moderate about it."

"I'm afraid I'm only moderate about it because there's not much of it anymore." Haley set a glass of water in front of her guest and then plated the toast. Proudly, because all food in the house was excellent food. "So... do you actually want a job?"

"No." Jennifer frowned at the bread, then broke her slice with elegant fingers. Even her nails were pretty: not painted, but filed into perfect ovals. "But there's no school, and it doesn't look like there's going to be school ever again."

—which felt like an unnecessarily dramatic statement, but Haley wasn't going to call her on it—

"So what do I do all day? Mother won't let me clean or cook with her. I thought about volunteering, but everyone's turning it into... into a transaction, like paying for a lootbox."

Haley sat on her question about how the other girl knew about lootboxes if she didn't like games.

"I refuse to become some kind of... video game character killer/hunter/whatever. It's wrong. So what's left?" Jennifer looked away with a scowl that even her cute button nose couldn't save. "I haven't got any ideas."

Haley poured herself a cup of coffee and used that time to summon the girl's system profile, and even to pry a little with [See Background].

Jennifer Bernard

Level 0 Human

Skills: Unclaimed

Class: Blocked

Haley'd never seen 'unclaimed' or 'blocked' before, and was surprised at how much it distressed her. It was one thing to be too young to have access to the system (or for the system to believe you needed access to it). But 'blocked' felt like the worst kind of missed opportunities, the kind you defaulted on yourself. This she knew because she'd had plenty of lectures on it from her father who, as usual, turned out to be right. She joined Jennifer at the table. "So, you want to work for the inn as... what, a waitress?"

"I can cook, clean, and yes, I guess I can bring food to tables. If you ever have anyone here to serve."

Since the house's evolution, they'd started attracting some of the townspeople for lunch, but Haley had yet to see an afternoon that she and Nana couldn't handle alone. "People like my grandmother's cooking."

Jennifer bit into the bread, wrinkled her nose. "I don't know why if this is what you call bread. Why did you put so much flour in it? It's too dense. And old. You should have toasted it longer."

Haley stared at her, because this was finally rudeness on a level she had no idea how to handle. And apparently, that was good enough as a reproach, because her guest blushed brightly.

"I'm sorry. I like making bread."

"Maybe you can make bread for us, then," Haley said from between gritted teeth.

[Congratulations! You have leveled skill **Self-Control** from Passive to Competent!]

[Continue practicing this skill to increase its level.]

Thanks, she told the aliens, and meant it, because getting *something* out of this conversation other than a headache and tight jaw was welcome. "In fact, if you want to make bread now, we could have it ready for the lunch crowd."

For the first time, Jennifer failed to sound defensive. "You mean it? You have ingredients?"

"Milk, eggs, flour, butter, sugar, salt, yeast... whatever you need." Haley rose and opened the pantry, pointing out everything. "I've got bowls here, and if you need spatulas or spoons, they're in this drawer. Or you can ask the house if you need anything."

"Ask the..."

Haley backpedaled. If Jennifer thought God had abandoned them and coffee was the devil's drink, who knew what she would think of an enchanted inn. "Me or Nana, I mean. Nana usually sleeps until mid-morning, but I'm up earlier. You can always run up to my room if you have any questions, it's on the second floor by the landing. Is there anything I'm forgetting?"

"How do you bake? We're using our fireplace..."

"The oven works. I'm not sure how it decides what temperature to use, but we turn the knob anyway."

Jennifer looked ready to denounce the oven as yet more proof of alien shenanigans, so Haley rapidly turned her attention from it. "Spices and herbs are in here, if you want to do something fancy. Am I forgetting anything?"

"An apron?" Jennifer said primly.

Haley didn't love the idea of lending her apron to such a mean person—did meanness rub off? Maybe she could leave her apron to dry in the winter sun, and that might disperse any bad energy. "In this drawer."

"All right. I assume I can throw this away." Jennifer held up the half a loaf as if it was molding.

"No, as long as you're working, chop it up into breadcrumbs. Mr. Collins sends some kids by to collect them in return for eggs. He uses them for his birds."

Jennifer sniffed. "That's terrible for the birds, but whatever. How much am I getting paid?"

Haley sat on her temper. "We haven't hired you yet. Show us what you can do first."

"Fine. I'll get started."

Leaving a stranger alone in their kitchen made Haley uneasy, but the prospect of overseeing Jennifer's work for the hours it would take for her to make a loaf of bread... she shuddered. No thank you. Heading back upstairs, she let her fingers trail along the wall and whispered, "Let me know if she does anything weird, all right?"

The wood warmed under her fingertips, and a twirl of light circled them before darting off.

"Thanks." Haley shook her head. "The worst that can happen is... she breaks something? She gets hurt?" Those didn't seem likely. "She answers the door and drives people away?" Far more probable. "But you'll sound the chime if someone does, unless they come through the side door, and only our friends come through the side door. They won't be upset by her. And Billy knows who she is." She sighed, reached up and redid her ponytail. "Mom and Dad always said you make people trustworthy by trusting them, so here's hoping that it works on the first try."

Haley's usual routine in the mornings was to make herself something to drink and then head upstairs to the loft to watch the town of Refuge wake up, but the draw of that activity was the sense of peace in the inn, knowing she was the only one awake. That had definitely been shattered by Jennifer's arrival, so she returned to her room instead to take out her notebook and start on something she'd been delaying for a while... for good reason! Because she'd had a lot of quests to issue, and inventory to restock, and people to talk to. The questboard outside the inn was crowded now, not only with her offerings, but with trade requests from townspeople wanting to barter their milk for someone else's repairwork, or their firewood for someone else's spare sweaters. There was a lot going on as more people moved to the abandoned homes in the center of town and started interacting, discovering the limits of their supplies and their abilities. And many of them, when they had questions, defaulted to asking the local questgiver.

But the holidays were barreling toward her with all the inexorability of a freight train, and that meant it was time to make a Christmas gift list.

"I know I can't give away my scrolls for no reason," she said. "Can I give them as holiday gifts?"

[Exceptions are made for local observances.]

"Good," Haley said. "Because it would take forever for me to single-crochet afghans for everyone on my list. I probably should have learned some other stitch." She displaced the desiccation scroll that had been protecting her workspace from the damp night air and plopped her notebook down on it. She didn't love the feel of the cheap ballpoint pen, but knowing she couldn't easily replace her non-system

inks made her loath to use them for pleasure. “I mean, I could feed them all to the system store,” she told everyone listening, and by now that was a cat, a house, and an alien software overlay. “But then I’d have to buy them back with system money, and I don’t know how much of that I have. I... could check, though. Duh.” She set her pen down and summoned the store interface.

As before, she had three tabs: one she could populate with items for locals to purchase, one she could populate for her own use, and one for worldwide use. To her surprise, she had 24 gold waiting for her—had so many people bought the alchemy items she’d donated to the worldwide store? She flipped to that tab and gaped at the number of items that had appeared on it since her last glance. “What... what happened? Did everyone discover the store at the same time?”

[Progress typically advances along predictable timelines.]

A fancy way of saying yes. “There’s so much. Swords? Crossbows? Wands? Robes?” She paused there, because she’d longed for wizard robes since her father had read her bedtime stories about magic. But she was no adventurer, and robes were expensive. “Can I narrow this down to alchemy stuff only?”

Immediately most of the items vanished. She recognized many of the remainder from her own donations, but her eye was drawn to the first listing: a [Message in a Bottle]. “Why is there an item for no cost?”

She expected an answer from the system, because unlike her usual rhetorical questions, she actually wanted to know this time. But there was no response.

Absent advice, the best thing to do was direct testing, wasn’t it? There was only one, and it was free, so... she tapped it. On her bed, Tom raised his head as an item fell onto her mattress.

“I’m glad only system items can be bought via the store, or delivery people like Oliver would be out of a job. And in a really weird way.” She plucked up the bottle, which reminded her of the heavy, bulbous bottles favored by a company she hadn’t bought much from, because their prices were too high. She’d always thought their ink looked like magic potions... maybe someone had thought the same?

There was a slip of paper in it. Before she pulled it out, she examined the whole.

[Message in a Bottle]

[This bottle is imbued with the hopes of its alchemist.]

[Offers noticeable bonuses to success in potion-making.]

[This item begins a quest.]

“Wow,” Haley breathed. “A quest item. For me?” She unscrewed the top and drew the paper out. The writing was cramped, and there was plenty of it.

Dear Friend:

I can't thank you enough for posting your imbued vial and all your inks. It makes me happy to think there's another person out there, trying things like I am! I hope you receive this bottle... it's the first one I made a potion in that worked. I'm hoping you'll have the same luck.

—S in Kentucky

P.S. I hope to start putting some things up on the store soon, now that you've given me some vials!

[Profession Questline Discovered: **The Cup of Human Kindness!**]

[You have been gifted a bottle for the purpose of crafting a potion by an altruistic colleague. Create one and post it on the system store.]

[Reward: Upgraded Profession, New Progression Paths, five basic potion bottles, 25 gold]

Haley squealed. "A quest! For me! *About* me, this time!" She bounced from her chair and danced in place, holding the bottle, and the house drew patterns of light under her feet. She dropped onto the bed, barely rumpling the cat. "I can't believe it. Someone sent me a message through the store. Someone bought my vials and found them useful! That's so amazing! I helped someone!" She peered at the bottle. "I can't wait to do something with you. It's going to be about Christmas, too, because I feel like it's come early. Maybe I can bottle the spirit of Christmas?" She went for her box of tiny sample vials, the one that included the inks from her advent calendar. Oh, she'd loved that advent calendar—candy was nice, but what was better than opening each tiny door every morning to a new color?

Her favorite had been 'Winter Miracle,' a dark blue with blue shimmer and red sheen. "This is my inspiration," she told the house, which was far more interested in what she was up to than Tom. "Except... what do I do with it? You don't make potions the way you make imbued inks, do you?"

[First quest discovered: **As Above, So Below**]

[You have uncovered the first step of your profession questline!]

[Every potion is composed of ingredients that make a symbolic link between a real item and an abstraction. Learn the relationship between the symbolic and the concrete by successfully linking an item suitable for your brew.]

[Reward: Potion ingredient]

“Oooh, now that’s something and... it sounds like philosophy.” She made a face. “Or like religion. Are you borrowing language from my Bible?”

[Complete **As Above, So Below** to better understand this facet of the system.]

Haley sat up, startling Tom. “Now that’s interesting! Maybe I’ll finally understand a little better how that’s supposed to work? How cool would that be? Sorry, Tom, you can go back to sleep.”

But the cat had had enough of her flailing apparently, because he dropped off her bed and sauntered out. Haley glanced after him, then had a look at her potion bottle. “I can’t even express how cool this is. After all these quests I’ve given other people, and couldn’t help with, and all the quests that I sort of help with but aren’t really about me, I finally get to do something myself. And I end up with a pen pal! Now if only the quest text was a little more helpful.”

If she’d been hoping that her comment would inspire the system to prompt her, she was (as Mr. Ellis would say), sadly out of luck. And while she dearly wanted to rush outside in search of some real thing she could figure out how to symbolically link to a concept, she didn’t want to forget the (also real) prospect of the holidays arriving without her having any gifts for her friends and neighbors. Also, she really didn’t want to go downstairs and run into Angry Jennifer the Baker. So she resumed her seat and went to work on her Christmas list. Nana was first, of course, and then her friends, including Billy and Mumps, because dogs needed presents too. But also Old Witch Mavis, who joined them for brunch once a week, and Mr. Ellis, who played checkers with Nana when he wasn’t having his cooking lessons, and funny Mr. Collins and his goose and chicken. Haley also wrote in Eudolie’s family, because why not? And, after chewing on the end of her pen, Ruth, because while she couldn’t think of what to give an enchanted inn off the top of her head, she thought making an effort would please the house.

“I wish,” she told the paper, “I could put Mom and Dad on this list. I miss them a lot. Would it be too much to ask for some word from them soon, God? I don’t need any other Christmas present.” She sighed, drew a heart with a crack through it, stared at it glumly and thought she was doodling like a moody middle-schooler. “Right. Let’s brainstorm some gift ideas.”

Coming up with gift ideas led naturally to replenishing her scroll inventory, so it wasn’t long before she was deep in magical practice. Cleaning her dip pen between scrolls, Haley reflected that had she ended up the wizard she’d yearned to be, she would have been... doing something else, probably outside, and it would have been exciting but also uncomfortable. Instead, she got to do something she loved to do, and it created magic. Was that part of the point? That being deeply engaged with your work *created* magic, and was that why everyone’s classes were so specific and strange?

"I really need a clock," she muttered later, peering out the window. "And I know the Latin word for time is 'tempus' but I doubt that'll help me. I need to be cleverer. Don't you think?"

The house painted a bobbing spiral on the wall over her desk, as if wondering too.

"Yes, I think so. Let's see if I can find anything in the textbook."

The glossary in the back of her book didn't have anything about clocks (though predictably, it told her about TEMPUS). But paging through it brought her to a chapter about a Roman household and that one mentioned sundials. "A horologium, yikes. There's a giant of a word. Let's see." She walked her fingers through her bottles, hovering between the [Ink of Summer Sunlight] (because sundials needed sun to work), and the [Shadow Ink], because wasn't that how the sundial actually told time? With the cast shadow?

"Obviously the answer is both," she said. "Oh, gosh, I can't tell you how nice it is to feel like someone's listening when I talk out loud because I do it all the time and now I don't feel so dopey about it." The spiral pulsing slowly on the wall brightened and did a somersault, and she giggled. "Thank you. Anyway, let's try this." She peered at her tools. "Calligraphy nib, because it looks like a sundial... um... thingy? It probably has a name. Stick. Or glass pen, because it's about light? Both, obviously."

She picked a neutral tone for the paper, with good tooth, and painstakingly wrote HOROLOGIUM in the sunlight ink with the calligraphy nib, then again, inverse, with glass pen and the shadow ink. When she signed it, she was rewarded:

[Outstanding Scroll of Timekeeping]

[The uses for this scroll are many and mysterious....]

"But will it make my clock work?" She Duplicated it, just to have an extra, and then brought the original to her bedside, where the old digital clock radio had kept time for her since she could remember coming to Nana's. Rolling her lip between her teeth, she held out her hand and pushed the scroll on top of it. As it vanished, the display on her clock woke up, but not with numbers.

Two Hours Until Noontide
Twenty Days Until Winter Solstice
Three Hours Until a Pleasant But Difficult Surprise

Haley gaped at it. She could understand a magical clock keeping unusual intervals, but... was that last one a prophecy? That wasn't a thing, was it? "I can't do that," she told the system. "Fortunetelling is not all right. How do I turn that part off?"

[The system cannot tell the future.]

Was it her or was that a protest? It sounded sheepish to her. Maybe it was the speed with which it responded, or the fact that it wasn't answering her question? "If it can't tell the future, why is my clock predicting what's going to happen in an hour?"

[All paths branch from choices. The clock is reflecting the consequence of a choice made several hours in the past.]

"That's... still fortunetelling." Haley frowned, rubbed the wrinkles on her forehead. "I think, anyway. Which means I can't use the clock. I guess I could give it to someone who isn't Christian. I don't think Oliver is? I should ask him, I guess." She hunted around her desk for a rag and gently draped it over the clock. "Sorry," she said, patting it. "I know it's not your fault. But I'm pretty sure the point of the 'no fortunetelling' thing is if we think we know the future, we mess things up. That's why we trust God instead."

She cleaned her materials and was considering whether she wanted to do another set of scrolls when the words popped up in front of her.

[Query: is prophecy unacceptable on client planet?]

Haley sank onto her stool. "Oh boy." And then she laughed, feeling an unwilling sympathy for Jennifer. Once in a while it registered that there were aliens out there who didn't understand her beliefs, and how mindblowing that was: actual aliens. "Prophecy is okay when it comes from God, but you're not God. And I don't think you're speaking for Him either, any more than I can. So if you ask a big chunk of the world, because I think about half of us are Christian or Muslim, they're not going to like it. I can't answer for the other half."

She went back to cleaning. A few moments later:

[Noted.]

Whatever that meant. She thought about asking the aliens about their beliefs, decided she'd rather not know. If she accepted that God was the Creator of the universe, then the existence of aliens required them to be made by Him too. If they didn't already know Him, He was probably working on it without one Haley Landry's interference.

After copying a few more scrolls (and then cleaning again), Haley peeked out into the hall and cocked her head. The sound of Nana moving around drew her from her room. She knocked on her grandmother's door. "Nana, are you awake?"

"Come in, little comet."

Haley opened the door just enough to see her grandmother petting Tom, who had gotten inside... how? Possibly the open window and the veranda? "He's gotten huge," she said, bemused.

"How could you say that?" Nana cooed, addressing the cat. "He's obviously the exact right side. Aren't you, Thomascat."

Haley grinned. "I just wanted to tell you that Billy's sister is downstairs making bread in our kitchen. She wants a job. She's... ah... a little bit prickly."

"A job, is it?"

Haley nodded. "Do we have one to give her? We're not all that busy..."

"God will provide," Nana said cheerfully. "I'll get dressed and introduce myself."

"Are there any chores I should handle today?"

Her grandmother made a considering noise. "Well, Thanksgiving is over and Christmas is on its way... can you and Ruth start on decorations?"

"That sounds like fun!" Haley said. "I'll do that."

"Excellent, cometling. And now I will finish petting the cat so I can get on with my day."

"Christmas decorations!" Haley said to the house after shutting the door.

"That's going to be fun. And a lot of work. I should invite people to help."

Before she could head to her room to write up a note for the questboard, a glowing square opened before her, complete with ghostly feather pen.

[Issue quest?]

"Um... yes?" Haley took the pen, which trailed a misty blue light as she set the pointed tip to the square. "Okay, very cool." With a flourish she wrote out her request for help decorating the inn, giving as a reward some silver pieces and food.

"Whatever food I can find. I think there are cookies? I could make cook—no, I do not want to be in the kitchen at the same time as Jennifer." Haley wrinkled her nose. "I think that was rude of me, but... she was rude first? Can I blame me?" Shaking her head, she signed the quest and watched it vanish, followed by a note that said 'Quest Posted.' "Handy. When did that become a thing?"

[Meta classes provide timesaving upgrades when leveled.]

"Am I missing any other timesaving upgrades? I should see a list of those—no, not right now. I'm going to go find the decorations. Ruth, what closet, or dimensional hole, did you hide them in?"

Several swirls of light woke on the walls and darted down the hall to wait by the stairwell.

"All right, coming. Just... ah... steer me around the kitchen?"

The light spiraled and bounced as if in acknowledgment.

“Great, let’s go dig!”

By the time Haley had excavated the Christmas decorations from the guest hall closet and dragged the first of the boxes into the common room, Eudolie was peeking through the front door. “Haley?”

“This way, oh, that’s really cool! You have a... a bow *scabbard*! Or is that a quiver?”

Eudolie was drawing off the leather sling and setting it by the door. “It is called by the system a backquiver, but the bow fits in it. A quest reward, for following a trail to its end in the deepwoods.”

“I didn’t know the system could give quest rewards like that!”

Eudolie laughed. “It did not! It transformed an old plastic quiver in the shed!”

“Still, that’s pretty awesome. You look very scary in it.”

The girl shook her head. “I doubt this, me. Everyone tells me I am too cute to intimidate. Let me take that box.” As she lifted it, she added, “Something smells good. Your grandmother is baking?”

“It’s a long story,” Haley answered.

“I am listening?”

“It’s Billy’s sister, she’s applying to work here by baking bread, and I’m avoiding her because she’s grumpy.” Haley paused. “All right, that was actually a pretty short story.”

Eudolie laughed. “We will decorate around her.”

Which is what they did, because there was more than enough to do. Every time Haley thought she’d found the last box, something else appeared in the closet. She asked the house if she was Duplicating things, and the only answer was a slowly rocking light on the wall, like a kid trying not to answer a question. “I guess Enchanted Inns need secrets,” Haley said, patting the wall, “or they wouldn’t be very mysterious.”

By the time the third box had been unpacked, Oliver and Jean-Baptiste had arrived, and Haley found them ladders so they could hang plastic evergreen boughs along the ceiling in the common room and the guest hallway, and the bathrooms, and then there were red cinnamon-scented candles for the tables and green pine-scented ones for the guest rooms—a mystery, since she thought Nana had said she only had hurricane candles—and plastic hollyberries, and golden and silver stars to hang from corners, and, of course, the wildest thing: finding a Christmas tree base in the bottom of the closet, tugging on it, and having an entire tree follow it out as all of them pulled.

“Did your grandmother have a plastic Christmas tree?” Oliver asked her, laughing.

"Yes! She used to tell us about it on the phone: 'I've put up the tree'... with a picture. But it was half this size!"

"It wouldn't be big enough for all of us to decorate if it was shorter," Jean-Baptiste said. "So that worked out."

The three of them teased Jean-Baptiste into singing carols while they worked, and he consented only if they would join in, so they worked and laughed and sang... and Haley wondered if she really needed a clock to tell her the time, or if that was another way to be neurotic about things she should be doing when everything would happen in its time, as Nana would say. Certainly she could get a sense of the hour by when she became hungry... but before she could venture into the kitchen, Jennifer appeared, slammed a tray down with sandwiches, cookies, and a pitcher hard enough to make the glasses on it rattle. "I was forced to make peanut butter sandwiches because the leftover bread didn't deserve any better," she declared. "And I didn't make the cookies. You can tell because they're stale."

Then she rounded on a heel and marched back into the kitchen.

"That was Billy's sister, then," Eudolie said.

Jean-Baptiste took a sandwich. "She's cute." When they stared at him, he shrugged. "Angry girls can be cute."

"I think I like my dates less aggressive," Oliver said. Which led Haley to wonder how aggressive *she* was, and then to tell herself it was none of her business what Oliver thought of her.

"These are yesterday's sugar cookies," Haley said instead. "And I don't think they're that bad." She checked the pitcher: hot cocoa. With little marshmallows floating on top. Maybe Nana's influence? She poured for everyone, and after a drink, they resumed their efforts. After that, she transferred some silver pieces to everyone's system account and wrapped up the remaining cookies so they could take them home, and then collapsed in the common room to enjoy the muted twinkling of the stars and the cinnamon candle smell, which was mingling in a mouthwatering way with the yeast-and-fruit scent emanating from the kitchen. Dare she enter? But she wanted to know what was producing that fragrance....

"It's just another girl," she told herself. "Jean-Baptiste even thinks she's cute enough to date. You can do this. Also, Nana's probably in there, she said she was coming downstairs."

But when she entered the kitchen, Jennifer was the sole person in it, scrubbing the counters. There were dinner rolls cooling on a rack, buttery gold and glistening... and hanging between two chairs was a second, taller bread, suspended by two skewers.

"What is that?" Haley blurted.

"It's panettone," Jennifer said. "It needs a sourdough starter and more time, but you can still do a good one with only a few hours of work. And you had..." She made a frustrated noise, sweeping a hand toward the pantry. "You have so many

things. Multiple sacks of flour. Sugar. Dried fruit. Butter, milk, eggs....” Her shoulders hunched. “I went a little crazy.”

“Two breads doesn’t seem crazy?”

Jennifer opened the oven and brought out another pan. This one had a gleaming, braided challah on it, studded with raisins.

“Three does feel a little overboard. Why don’t you take half of this home?”

Jennifer looked up. “I thought you wanted to save it for the lunch rush?”

“If they haven’t arrived by now, they probably won’t. At least, not in significant enough numbers to use up all... this.” The girl was vacillating, Haley could tell, so she kept going. “I know a lot of people didn’t set up for—” Haley caught herself before she could mention the aliens, “what happened, and we have working appliances, more or less, which is something people are still struggling with. We won’t be able to eat all this, so yes, I mean it. And maybe we should discuss what you want to be paid.”

The girl sounded sulky, but her turned back made those tense shoulders obvious to Haley. “You haven’t even tried anything yet.”

Haley picked up one of the dinner rolls. “These look the closest to cooled off?” She parted it, tried not to salivate when the steam brought her another gust of that fresh bread aroma. There was no *not* eating it when it smelled so good, so she popped half of it in her mouth. Soft. Yeasty. Hot and buttery and tender and—“oh my gosh, these are amazing. I am dead. How long did you practice to be able to make bread this good?”

Jennifer folded the kitchen towel and set it on the counter. “Since I was five or six. I helped my mom, and then I started doing it on my own.” She shrugged. “Other girls liked to bake sweets. But anyone can make a cookie. A good loaf of bread takes skill.”

That comment could have been insulting if Haley had cared more about what Jennifer thought of her than she cared about whether Jennifer would keep making bread in her kitchen. “I certainly can’t make anything like this. So...? What do you want? I could pay you in scrolls to make your oven at home work again...”

That inspired a thunderous scowl. “I don’t want any demonic magic in my house.”

“It’s not—” She stopped, because that was unanswerable. They were both Christian, and it was clear what the Bible said about magic. Suddenly she was questioning her own acceptance of the alien system. “Supplies? We have meat and eggs and milk, or if you need staples like flour or cornmeal...”

Supplies were an acceptable trade for Jennifer, who watched as Haley loaded up one of Nana’s big canvas grocery bags and then frostily accepted it. “What time should I come back tomorrow? I suggest dawn. To get any significant amount of baking done, you need to start early.”

Haley did not want to relinquish her quiet mornings, no matter how good the bread was. "Come after it's light out. And use the side door. I'll make sure it's open for you."

"Fine." Jennifer shifted the straps of the bag, then took the challah, wrapped in a handful of napkins. She managed to somehow look angrier, but the words that came out of her mouth were: "Thank you. For this."

"You're welcome," Haley answered, and watched her go. As she stood at the door, the cat brushed against her leg on his way out, tail high. Reassuring her, maybe? Or just being a cat? She no longer knew, because if houses could talk and cats could grow to the size of large dogs, who knew what was going on anymore?

Haley nabbed a couple more of the dinner rolls and went in search of Nana, who was on the back porch, buried under two afghans on a rocking chair. She looked so cozy with only her face and a few tufts of white hair sticking up from the mound that Haley started giggling.

"I know," Nana said cheerily. "I'm so covered in blankets that I have to plan how I reach for my coffee. And yet, how comfortable I am!"

Haley pulled one of the rocking chairs over and sat on the other side of the folding tray table. "Here," she said, passing her grandmother a roll. "Try this."

"Ah, our potential employee's test." Nana pulled off a piece, popped it in her mouth. A moment later her brows rose. "My."

"I know," Haley said. "She's so good." She glanced over at Nana. "Do you like her?"

"A delightful, if troubled, girl."

Troubled, Haley could see. Delightful? "You liked her?"

Her grandmother burst out laughing. "From your tone you'd be more surprised if I hugged an alligator. Yes, dear, I liked her, but I suspect she was more respectful to me than she was to you. And she's obviously unhappy, which is never anyone's best look."

"I told her we would hire her..."

"A good decision. Much as I enjoy making bread, I'm only passable at it. This is exquisite." Nana finished off the roll. "Goodness. Even without butter that was something."

"So I should get the rest of the basket... and butter..."

"Jam?"

Haley was already moving.

Five rolls with jam later, Haley refilled Nana's coffee and said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Is the magic we're doing... evil?"

Nana was silent a moment, then pushed her toe against the veranda and began rocking. "Got to you, did she."

"A little, maybe." Haley paused. "All right, a lot. She was awful to be around. But she's not wrong about... you know. Magic and witchcraft being against God. Should we be opting out? The way she is?"

"Is she?"

Haley thought of Jennifer's system description: unclaimed, and blocked. "Yes."

Nana nodded and said nothing for a while. Haley wanted to be more anxious, but she was pleasantly full, and calmed by the sound of Nana's rocker squeaking against the veranda with all the predictability of a metronome. She warmed her palms against her coffee mug and watched a brown leaf drift off one of the trees.

"I won't presume to speak for more educated minds than mine," Nana said at last. "So what I'm about to tell you is strictly my own opinion. Nothing official, or backed by scripture."

"All right..."

Nana nodded. "Tell me how technology is different from magic, little comet."

Haley opened her mouth, then let it sag closed when her first answer didn't make any sense. "That's hard, because until the system apocalypse I didn't think magic was real."

Nana grinned. "Me neither. Not in the sense of fantasy movies."

"I guess I would have said in the past that magic comes from... the world, but technology is made by people. But now I'm not so sure. Is the magic we have now because of aliens... technology? Because they made it possible, so maybe they know how to create it? Or is it some change in... I don't know. The way the universe works? Physics? Can the laws of physics be changed?" She paused. "By anyone but God, I guess? Since He made them. Presumably."

"All questions we don't have answers to," Nana agreed. "Though I am planning to ask after I move on from this mortal coil."

"Don't do that soon?"

Nana chortled. "What, and leave this very interesting world just as it's started surprising me again? No, thank you." She sobered. "I have often felt that technology comes between us and God. It can help us... but it can also amplify our cruelest and most sinful impulses. When I look at the 'magic' around us now, I see it much as I saw technology: capable of distracting us from what's important, and divorcing us from our relationship with God and one another."

Haley brought her feet up onto the edge of her rocking chair's seat and hugged her knees. "It's weird not to have a phone. Or the internet. It was weird in a bad way at first, but now..."

"Now?"

This was embarrassing, but the fact that it was proved Nana's point. "Having access to anything I wanted, whenever I wanted, made me never want to stop looking for things. It was like this nagging voice that kept pulling me out of what was happening around me and back into my own head. And it was constant. Like when your eyelid starts twitching and you can't stop it. Until it all went away, I didn't

realize how hard it was making it to concentrate... like I was losing the ability to focus a little more every day and never noticing it slipping away. It's scary, now that I'm unplugged. I didn't even use my phone as much as some of my friends did. They'd go out together to coffee shops and spend the entire time there looking down instead of at one another. It was weird." She grimaced. "I'm not proud of it, but we all did it."

Nana nodded. "Me too, cometling. Maybe you understand then, when I say that the Biblical warnings against magic seem to apply to technology as well, to me. Trust in God, it says, and don't be distracted from the path. So... no, I'm not sure I believe that our new magical powers are intrinsically evil. But I do think we need to be careful how we wield it, as we would any tool given to our hands." She chuckled. "Of course, I could be wrong. It would be best to ask the minister. Just in case. Here, now, pass that last roll."

"You're not going to have any stomach left for dinner!"

"What a tragedy! Butter it for me, yes, a nice big pat."

Haley left Nana to enjoy the final roll on the veranda. The silence of the kitchen was a relief; she ran a hand over the wall, stroking one of the pantries. "I guess it's silly of me to think of the appliances and furniture being upset by the energy Jennifer was giving off. Especially since—" She paused to stare at the panettone, still hanging upside down between two chair backs, "—she did make such delicious food here. But still. I think I like the house better when the people in it are happy."

Ruth drew a circle of light under her foot and wiggled it.

"You too? I won't tell if you don't."

The light wobbled then darted toward the common room. Since that hadn't been the 'answer' Haley expected, she frowned and followed. Everything was as she and her friends had left it: sparkling and fragrant and festive, and not a thing out of place except—

"Really? You're worried about a single evergreen frond?" Haley bent and picked up the plastic bit. "It probably came off one of the Christmas tree branches. Is it because you couldn't clean it? I don't think the cleaning enchantment works on anything this large, but that's okay. That's what you have me for." She frowned, twisting the plastic frond so it caught the light. If she turned it just so, it looked real, and the pine scent from the candles fooled her into thinking....

"Oh!" she said, and hurried out the front door. There was a copse of pine trees on the west side of the property, near the gazebo, and while the fake frond was arranged more like a fir's bough, the pines were the closest evergreens. They were beautiful, too, tall and slim, with lances of golden light falling between them onto the moist ground, which... Haley had plenty of opportunity to notice because she'd failed to put on shoes. She stretched her toes in her socks as they grew damp, and decided that might not be a bad thing. It helped her be present here, amid the real,

concrete things that her grandmother's fake tree had been intended to evoke: as above, so below.

Holding up her bit of holiday detritus, Haley closed her eyes and inhaled the fragrance of evergreen sap and damp bark. Her fingers tingled from the cold as she rolled the plastic stem between them, seeking... what? The link between facsimile and reality. Not everyone could have a real Christmas tree every year, and this was the best they could do. And the best could be really good, if your heart was in it.

A breeze tugged at her hair, carried with it the distant song of carols. When Haley opened her eyes again, the frond in her fingers was soft, the branch scratchy with a sticky end where it had broken from the branch. Awed, she cradled it on her palm and pushed it with her fingertip.

[Congratulations! You have completed profession quest: **As Above, So Below!**]

[You have earned 500 XP.]

[Transform two more materials to advance to the second step of your questline.]

"I can't believe this is now... a real frond? Is it?" She twirled it, and it startled her by becoming translucent, spinning off a few twinkling motes like a sparkler before resuming its illusion of solidity. "Oh, I see. It's something else now." She tried examining it.

[Evergreen Essence]

[Platonic Material]

[This magical item evokes the spirit and qualities of coniferous trees.]

"So I need two more of these to make my potion. Nothing about this says Christmas, but I'm still going with my winter miracle theme. What next, though?" She shook her head. "Maybe I'll come up with something while working on gifts."

For the hours between lunch and dinner, Haley applied herself to making presents. Some of her gifts were selfish, or at least, they were before she got involved with making them happen; her desire to have a record of the lives of the elders in her life led her to the idea of enchanted journals, but it turned out that nothing she had on hand really served to realize her vision. She wanted books that would both help their writers remember their lives, but also make it easier to write in them, knowing how Nana's wrists and fingers ached. So for an hour she experimented with various inks and additives until she stumbled onto an [Outstanding Gliding Ink], which she made from a few spritzes of WD-40; some of her painting medium, which she used to thin paint enough to get it flowing; and her Petroleum ink, which was a greenish blue until it got mixed with everything else. The gliding ink was a light gray,

almost invisible, which was *much* better than what the three things mixed together had been before she'd started shaking the vial.

With that ink, a glass pen, and her smoothest paper, she'd cast around with her Latin glossary, creating some accidentally useful looking things, like the [Remarkable Quickness Scroll] with EXPEDITUS, which she'd thought meant 'prepared' or 'ready' but she'd take a quickness scroll, and the [Remarkable Scroll of Adaptability], with HABILUS. It was FACILIS that produced what she wanted, though, a [Remarkable Effortless Scroll], and with that and the [Scroll of Reminiscing] in her inventory she was able to enchant several of her spare journals. Pressing the scrolls onto them gave their covers a faint sheen that flowed when the light moved over them.

[Remarkable Life Journals]

[These enchanted books bring forth memories and make recording them easy. Filled books have the potential to evolve into more potent magical items.]

Producing three of those was enough to drain Haley of all her energy. She dropped onto her bed, face down into a pillow, and breathed the smell of her pillowcase until she got tired of it and turned her head. That forced her to confront the rag-covered clock. "I feel really bad about that," she told Ruth, or the aliens. Both, probably. She lifted the rag just enough to see the reflected glow off the letters. "I'm sorry. You've been such a good clock. I hate making you feel unwanted."

She didn't know what prompted her to lift the rag all the way, but when she did, the clock was now displaying only two lines:

One Hour Until Sunset
Twenty Days Until Winter Solstice

"That's... actually better. Thank you?" She grimaced. "I guess the pleasant but difficult surprise before was that Jennifer could actually bake. Which qualified. But I'm glad you're not trying to warn me about things in the future." Was it her, or did the letters seem dimmer? Was the clock... unhappy? "Maybe there's something else you could tell me instead. Like the weather? Do you know the weather?"

The letters brightened, and a new line appeared under the second.

One Day Until Cold Front – Expect Temperature Drop

"That's amazing, thank you. Knowing the weather will be useful. And that's not telling the future, or at least, if it is, then I shouldn't have been looking up weather forecasts all these years." Haley paused. She was negotiating with her clock. Was that weirder than talking to her house? Had she put this much effort in her life before into talking with God? No, she talked to God constantly. It amazed her that He

listened, given how much she babbled. Her stomach growled and she rested her hand on it. “Maybe He thinks of my complaining the way I think of my body making noises? No, that’s ridiculous.” She shook her head. “I need food, and to think about that next enchantment item.”

Downstairs, Nana was overseeing strips of duck bacon, sizzling on the stovetop, while humming ‘I Saw Three Ships.’ “Oh, Haley, dear... We got another crop of mushrooms there if you want to rinse them and do something with them.”

Haley eyed the duck. “I could sautee them in the fat? Mushroom side item? If only we hadn’t eaten all of Jennifer’s dinner rolls...”

Nana cackled. “I regret nothing.”

Haley thought about it, grinned. “Me neither.”

They ate by the fireplace in the common room, and talked about food—inevitably, maybe. Haley hadn’t thought she would miss fresh vegetables, but the catch-as-catch-can situation the entire town found itself in was uncomfortable. They needed to figure out how to feed everyone consistently, and soon, because even the preppers would run out of stores eventually. But after dinner, Haley toasted some of Jennifer’s panettone and served it with more hot cocoa and both she and Nana agreed that no matter the girl’s attitude, she had to be kept happy enough to keep baking. “Because this is amazing,” Haley said. “I don’t even know what she put in it. Raisins? Dried cherries?”

“Orange peel,” Nana said. “At very least.”

Devouring the whole loaf after destroying an entire basket of rolls would have made Haley feel like a blimp, so she was glad when Mr. Ellis arrived for his checkers game and she could serve him a few slices before escaping upstairs. She’d never erased the small door she’d drawn onto her wall, and sitting on the second floor verandah to overlook the backyard and the forest was one of her favorite things now. And at dusk, it meant watching the trees become shadows against the vespertine purple of the sky, scattered with stardust, and the rustling in the boughs as the nocturnal animals woke and went about their lives. She could just hear the murmur of conversation floating through the downstairs kitchen window, and loved the sense that she was above the fray.

“Tell me more about the timesaving abilities I’ve earned without noticing,” Haley said, once she’d settled in with some blankets and a cup of hot tea.

[The following abilities may now be accessed remotely:]

[Issue Quest]

[View Active Quests]

[Town Inventory]

[The following abilities have been added:]

[Brainstorm Quest]

[Suggest Questline Step]

The first three were self-explanatory, and in fact, she'd been using them without realizing it, by bringing up the quest panels without walking outside to the board. It was only the [Issue Quest] skill that had surprised her, probably because the interface had required participation on her part. She'd gotten so used to the floating dialogue boxes provided by the alien system that the fact that she could summon the Town Inventory and Questboard without walking to those physical items had completely flown over her head as novel abilities.

But those last two.... "Have I been using Brainstorm and Suggest Step?"

[Abilities added based on existing process of the class holder.]

That was a very fancy way of saying it was adapting to what she was already doing. "When do I do those things? I don't remember doing them on purpose."

A pause, and then:

[The most creative processing happens during slumber.]

"Oh!" She laughed. "Oh no, I'm like Joseph. No, wait, I'm not even a little bit like Joseph, that was awfully arrogant. But I like the idea that my weird dreams are helpful." She pursed her lips. "I've always had vivid dreams. Maybe it was just meant to be? Or more probably, you work with what you have." She stared into the evening sky. "I wonder if I could bottle the night. More directly than I did by blending inks. I remember a book I read when I was little about unicorns, and they drank moonlight and ate sunlight..." She trailed off, but sadly, that memory didn't resolve into a title or author. Not that it would have mattered, since there wouldn't be any buying it on FamousRainforest and having it auto-shipped to her location. She sat up straighter. "Wait, wouldn't it be cool to bottle the light of the Star of Bethlehem? Except... oh no, I don't know which star it is." A heartbeat. "But there's an astronomer downstairs...!"

Mr. Ellis, peering at the checkerboard, showed no obvious signs of surprise when Haley burst into the kitchen and said, "Mr. Ellis, which star is the star the magi followed?"

"No one knows."

She stopped. "Really?"

He nodded and moved one of his pieces. "There are multiple theories, of course: distant supernovas, planetary conjunctions, comets, occultations. But it's speculative." He glanced up. "Does it matter?"

"Doesn't it?" she said.

He chuckled. "If you know how much we don't understand, and how many things in history we have only records of, but no evidence, until—abruptly—we have

evidence, you would be unfazed by our inability to pinpoint the Star of Bethlehem. Truth exists, and science is as rigorous as human minds can make it in pursuit of that truth. But we have our limitations. We're the better for them. The mysteries are more poignant when they must be fought for, and when the outcome of the struggle is uncertain."

This was more philosophy than Haley thought she was ready for, but it spoke to her in the way some poems did, before she fully understood them. And sometimes, she never understood the poems she liked. She just liked them.

"We make the star anew every year in our hearts," Nana said. "When we travel toward the revelation of Jesus's birth, and what it means to us."

Haley froze, because that sounded very much like the quest's description of real items and their relationship to symbolic ones.

"Inspiration strikes," Mr. Ellis murmured as he put a fork through his piece of panettone.

"Thank you, this was all really helpful."

"Any time, little comet," Nana said.

Haley raced back upstairs, her mind fluttering from one thought to another like a butterfly at double speed. Her fingers were shaking as she hunted for a vial and didn't find any spares. "Calm down, calm down," she muttered. "Inspiration already struck, it's not going anywhere. Show me my store window and open it to the alchemy search?"

She was so used to buying the spirit powder and spare vials by now that she almost missed there was a new vial type. Twitching her hand back from the floating dialogue, she examined it.

[Small Spiritually Imbued Vial (Nature)]

[This vial reacts favorably to contents relating to the Great Outdoors.]

Haley frowned. "That is... interestingly specific. Like I wonder if you even came up with that description." No answer. "Nature, though... that sounds perfect. I'll take one of those instead."

When the vial dropped on her bed, it showed itself to be shorter and fatter than her Art-themed vial, and with a forest-green cap. Like her art vial, it made a noise when she rolled it in her fingers, a hint of raindrops pattering on leaves. "When I understand how spirit powder can create such different vials depending on the person, I feel like I'll finally have a grasp on alchemy. But for now... what reminds me of starlight?"

The obvious answer to that, as embarrassing as it sounded, was glitter. Glitter evoked memories of squeezing glue into unevenly-cut stars made from construction paper, and flakes of it, flashing on her fingers, made her think of ornaments. She didn't even know why because stars weren't silver, were they? They were white. But

they did glimmer. Haley tapped her old, tiny plastic bottle gently until a few powdery bits drifted into her new vial, then looked around her room. "What else?"

Using ink seemed unnecessary—she wasn't trying to create an ink—but she had one called Moondust (or at least, that was the translation; it had come from a French manufacturer), and she couldn't resist. A drop went in, just enough to dampen the glitter. "What else," she murmured, because she wanted another thing. What thing made her think of stars?

"This is also dumb," she said a few minutes later, carefully prying a star the size of her thumbnail from the silver foil origami paper she'd used her art knife on. "And if I could remember how to do origami, I would totally have done that, but I haven't done origami since middle school and even then I don't think I could have made one small enough to cram in this vial. This will have to do." She dropped it into the vial. "Now for the important part. The other important part."

Donning a jacket and boots, she headed down the stairs and out the backdoor, and from there... she paused. The woods wouldn't give her an unobstructed view of the stars, and even if the magi hadn't gone down a literal road they had been traveling for a purpose, not meandering. Was it overly dramatic to say that all roads led to Christ? If you believed, it was true. Haley headed up the road, this time away from town. The evening was moist and cold, muffling her footsteps. Fortunately it wasn't wet enough for mist, and when she looked up, the first stars were already gleaming through the weight of the atmosphere. "We three kings of orient are," she whispered. How far should she go? She hadn't realized how eerie it would be, walking an abandoned road. No cars anymore, and no traveling, and no people heading toward Refuge... no street lights, either. Just the sound of... what was that? Frogs? Maybe an owl, now and then. And the absolute quiet in between.

What she'd told Nana was true, earlier... that she'd lived distracted by the internet and all the gadgets that used it. Did the aliens have a life like that? Had they chosen something different, and was that why their system Armageddon had imposed this enforced meditation on society? And why were there monsters?

And why had she come out here alone? She stopped. For once, she didn't feel like speaking aloud. She was much too small. What would it have been like, to set off after a star in search of a king, with only that trust to keep you going in a world where high technology involved riding a camel, or a horse? No fancy GPSes then....

Haley rotated in place, staring up at the sky, and didn't know why her eyes were seeping. Wiping them hastily, she uncapped the vial and held it up. "I didn't know until now the kind of courage and commitment it must have taken, to walk the road to Christmas. I only wish... I wish I could give that to other people. I wish I could have it myself, more. At all. Something."

The glass clutched in her hand pulsed once, warm against her palm, and then—oh, was this *real*?—a star darted down and fell into the vial with a 'plumpf', like a pebble dropping into a pond, complete with droplets of light arcing away from

the splash. Quickly, Haley capped the vial and then peeked at it. The glitter, the ink drop, the paper star, all gone. A spark was floating inside, like a glowbug but silvery.

[Essence of the Questing Star]

[Platonic Material]

[This magical item evokes the spirit of faith amid uncertainty.]

[Congratulations! You have transformed a second material. Transform one more to advance to the next step of your questline.]

[You have earned 500 XP.]

“Oh,” she whispered. “Thank you, God. It’s so beautiful.” And wiped her eyes again. “Ugh! I am... making a mess of myself.” She looked back up the road and winced, because it was now full dark and she didn’t love that. What if there were monsters in the woods? She glanced at them as she walked. Briskly. “Next time, I’ll bring...”

A shadow slid up to her leg and rubbed against it, leaving cat hairs all over her jeans. “Tom?”

And then the cat was jogging away in front of her, because Heaven forfend he actually pace her, like a dog. But his presence dispelled her fears, and she grinned. “Thanks, you weirdo.”

The cat’s tail tip twitched in the air. She grinned and pressed the vial to her chest, and hurried on her way.

That night, Haley dreamt she was falling off Seabiscuit-the-bicycle, which had donkey ears, and when she hit the ground, she said, “Ouch, is this the road to Christmas?” and Jennifer appeared and lifted her chin. “No, it’s the road to Damascus. Why aren’t you on it, demon-drink-drinker?” All Haley’s protestations that she didn’t like coffee fell on deaf ears as she struggled to rise, and couldn’t because the bicycle had fallen on her chest. With a gasp, she woke up and discovered Tom halfway across her torso. “What the heck, cat! You were already heavy and now you’re four or five times as heavy as you look like you should be?”

The cat lifted his head and yawned at her, and she laughed. “You’re an idiot, but you’re still cute. And I guess I should be up...” She rolled over and discovered she’d over slept.

One Hour After Sunrise
Nineteen Days Until Winter Solstice
Minus Two Hours Since Cold Front

Three Hours until Fresh Bread

“Drat, I missed being alone with myself.” She paused, amused. “Really? Minus two hours?”

The clock flashed that line.

“I guess you really want me to know about the cold. Thanks, I’ll wear the extra thick socks.”

The line about the cold front vanished. Haley sat up, starting the process of peeling herself out from under all her blankets. “Ruth, did you let Jennifer in already?”

A spiral of light appeared on the wall next to her and did a quick rotation.

“Thanks for that. Now all I have to do is—”

[Broadcast Message: A potential Sanctuary has been nominated! The Blue Cypress United Methodist Church on Main Street now has a Steward and a Groundskeeper and has accrued enough themed activity points for its eligibility. A Sanctuary requires confirmation from the community to be selected. Donate contribution points to support the creation of this Town Amenity.]

Haley gasped. “One of the six amenities we need... was a church?”

[A Sanctuary is required for basic township status. Any building can serve as a Sanctuary as long as it meets the requirements.]

“Which are...?”

[A Sanctuary requires a Steward to oversee its administration and a Groundskeeper for maintenance. It must offer safety, shelter, and aid to any who request it. And it must be acknowledged by the community as a place of healing. A Sanctuary makes possible the recruitment and training of healing classes.]

That was... enormous. And for once, she didn’t have to do anything other than watch someone else handle it? She’d been responsible for the dungeon and the inn and had resigned herself to having to figure out everything else herself, too. The fact that she didn’t was such an enormous relief that she started laughing. “Oh, this is such a good Christmas gift, and it’s *early*. Thank you, God. But yes, please, take all my contribution points and deliver them to the church! I assume the Steward is the minister? And... I’m guessing the Groundskeeper is Mr. Touchard? He was already doing the janitorial work and most of the gardening...”

Instead of answering, her Town Inventory popped up, highlighting the names... and she was right. "Did you donate my points? All of them?"

[Confirm transfer of all outstanding Contribution Points to the Blue Cypress United Methodist Church?]

"Yes, please!"

[Done. Sanctuary is 22% confirmed.]

Haley hugged Tom, much to the cat's disgust. "Best waking up, ever. I can face Jennifer right now. Or anything!" When he bit her, she smacked the top of his nose. "Ouch. Also, I'm still cheerful! Today I'm going to work on more Christmas gifts, and bottle my last ingredient, and make a potion. And..." She trailed off, nodded. "I'm still going to go to the lookout and enjoy a quiet morning, even if Billy's sister's here. Because if she's going to be here in the mornings more often, then I either have to adapt or lose one of the best parts of the day."

If Tom could have snored on purpose, he couldn't have more clearly communicated his lack of interest in her plans. She grinned and mounded up her blankets against his back to take her place. "See, I'm even being a good cat friend."

Downstairs, Jennifer was already mixing something, and to Haley's surprise there was a pot of coffee ready and a bowl of cornbread muffins. Haley's arrival caused the other girl to look up, blush furiously, and resuming scooping flour into a measuring cup. "Your grandmother said people who stop by will expect coffee, so I made some. And the muffins, in case someone was hungry."

"I am, and thank you." Haley made herself pour a mug as if she wasn't thinking about dream-Jennifer castigating her for her caffeine habits, went to the refrigerator for cream. It was hard to mix up her coffee the way she liked it while standing near enough to Jennifer to imagine what she was thinking behind that wall of prickly silence. Finally, she couldn't stand it. "Did you have a nice evening? We demolished all the bread you left."

"I saw. Did some guests come after I left?"

"I'm afraid Nana and I did for the rolls all by ourselves, but Mr. Ellis helped with the other bread. What are you making today?"

"French bread. That's hard to do right. And cinnamon swirl bread. Maybe some focaccia if I have time. I thought about pretzels, you can do that with lye if you have baking soda. Or bagels, though I've only done that a few times."

"You can make pretzels? And bagels?" Haley stared at her. "You're going to be the most popular person in town, you know that?"

Jennifer scowled. "That's not funny."

There was no coming back from that, so Haley grabbed her mug and a muffin. "If you need anything, I'll be upstairs."

“Fine. Thanks.”

Was she running from Jennifer? Yes, yes, she was. “And I’m all right with that,” Haley told herself as she climbed to her roost in the lookout. “Because I don’t need to fix everyone. That’s God’s job, not mine, and He’s working on it on His time and if He needs my help, He’ll inform me. Right, Ruth?”

The little spiral was so dim as it trailed after her that it looked discouraged.

Haley sighed. “All right, me too. But I’m not going to let her get me down. We have coffee to drink and gifts to make.”

After conducting her morning ritual, Haley returned to her room and went to work on gifts for her friends. She had some precedents to work with for her next set, so it didn’t take her long to riff off her [Noteworthy Scroll of Burn Relief] until she’d figured out how to make a [Remarkable Scroll of Fireproofing]. Two of those she set aside for Billy so he could fireproof both his dog’s armor and himself, in preparation for further adventures in wizardry.

Her biggest breakthrough happened after, when she decided to try using the same technique that had recreated the [Noteworthy Scroll of Duplication]. Writing OPPOSITUS in reverse, using the bathroom mirror, with her calligraphy nib and the invisible ink, and then drawing the same word with glass pen properly, with the Ink of Clarification, created a [Noteworthy Scroll of Reversal] and then, shockingly:

[You have discovered Meta Skill: **Reverse!**]

[Allows meta class holders to create oppositional situations and actions when those would benefit regular class holders they are aiding. This skill is subject to cooldowns deemed appropriate by the system.]

[You have earned 100 XP.]

“I don’t even know what that means and it sounds amazing.” Haley looked at her scroll. “Does that mean I could apply Reverse to... say... my light scroll and create a darkness scroll?” No answer, but she had a spare light scroll so....

A few minutes later, she had a [Scroll of Darkness]... and a Reverse ability she couldn’t use for another twelve hours. “Ouch. I’m going to have to use that one carefully. But this is amazing! Can I still use the reverse scroll, though, if my reverse skill is unavailable?”

[Scroll and ability are separate actions.]

After Duplicating her reversal scroll, Haley used it for her intended purpose: reversing her Scroll of Stealth in hopes of creating a Scroll of Superior Hearing, or something. Unfortunately, what she ended up with was a [Remarkable Scroll of Noise], which made ‘existing noises more noticeable.’ That was almost disappointing, except maybe she could turn it into a magic item that amplified sounds? If she put it on a... a horn? And then maybe if you blew through the horn,

instead of listening, it would make a noise as loud as a train whistle? Haley started laughing. "What a ridiculous life I'm leading. Too funny."

The front door chime rang, surprising her. She glanced at the clock, which informed her it was 'two and a half hours until lunch,' which meant Nana was probably still in bed. Haley trotted downstairs, ignoring Jennifer on the way through the kitchen.

The visitors revealed by the opening of the front door were a collection of nine children, between the ages of six and eleven, maybe, and one shepherding teen girl around Jennifer's age. They wore colorful scarves and festive hats, and themed Christmas sweaters and were carrying folders and jingle bell sticks. Before the teen could speak, the little ones started. "We came to sing for you!" "We're caroling!" "You have to give us candy!" "No, that's a different holiday."

Clearing her throat, the girl in charge of them put her hands on the heads of the two most enthusiastic boys and said, "Hi! Can we sing you some carols?"

"Oh! I'd love that! But my grandmother's asleep, and she'd hate to miss real carolers! Could you come back later? I can have cookies for you then, too."

There was no restraining the glee then. The girl shook her head, but she was smiling. "What time should we be back?"

"Closer to lunch, if you can manage it, but Nana should be up in an hour or so."

"All right, crew, this will be our last stop! Let's go spread more cheer!"

Haley watched them go, absurdly cheered by the sight of the scarves swinging behind the little backs. She hadn't thought seriously about not having brothers or sisters, but maybe that was because she hadn't been around younger kids much at home. Closing the door, she sighed and went into the kitchen. "I'm on the hook for cookies later, do you mind if I bake?"

Jennifer eyed her. "It's your kitchen."

"I know, but I don't want to be disruptive."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "It's fine. Who was at the door?"

"Some carolers, and a girl. Is that a thing here at Christmas? Caroling?"

"It's not a thing where you are?"

Haley tried not to wilt, because Jennifer sounded so incredulous. Like confronting someone who'd never had a TV. Or something even more basic, like electricity. "No. The city's pretty big. It would take a lot of people to do door-to-door caroling and... and it would be awkward." She thought about her neighborhood, which hadn't had a security guard or gate, but a lot of neighborhoods she knew of, did. And the ones that didn't had weird rules that her parents were always complaining about. She would bet there was one involving knocking on people's doors and making noise at them.

"It was probably Nevaeh." Jennifer sniffed. "Though why she's taking them out this year, I don't know."

"It's still Christmas," Haley said.

Jennifer didn't answer immediately, and Haley hoped that was the end of it. Of course, it wasn't, because then there was an awkward silence, and the ending of it didn't make things any better. "Those two older kids you introduced my brother to. You know they're Catholics."

"I guessed...?"

"I don't approve."

Baffled, Haley said, "B-because?"

Jennifer eyed her. "The Catholics are no better than pagans. I don't want him picking up any strange ideas."

Haley doubted Billy was picking up anything from Eudolie and Jean-Baptiste that could be worse in Jennifer's eyes than what he was picking up from Mr. Ellis. Maybe the other girl didn't know about his magic lessons, though. She forced herself to finish setting out the ingredients for sugar cookies, a recipe she'd chosen because she would have to refrigerate the dough and that would allow her to escape until Jennifer went home. "So who's Neveah?"

Maybe Jennifer wasn't completely hopeless, because she accepted the change of subject. "One of the girls from school. She tries."

Haley winced. "She's... good with kids, at least?"

"For the best, because she'll probably end up with six or seven."

That was too much for Haley, who stopped in the act of transporting the sugar from the pantry to the counter. And maybe Jennifer realized it, because the other girl made a face.

"Sorry, that slipped out. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Not a friend of yours, I'm gathering."

"You make it sound like I don't have any friends."

Since even mean girls had groupies, Haley didn't agree. And felt bad about it, immediately. She felt bad about thinking that there was a reason Billy was always out of the house, too. "I'd like to meet some more people around my age. Maybe at a mixer somewhere? Or we could do a dance, one of these days. That might be fun."

"Maybe."

Haley gave up, made her dough as quickly as possible, and ran away. Nana had called Jennifer 'troubled.' If she held that observation foremost in her mind while interacting with the girl, would that make her barbs less tiresome? Probably not. Haley sighed.

Haley didn't creep backstairs until after she was sure her grandmother had risen, and it was all for nothing... Jennifer had gone by midmorning, leaving instructions about the cinnamon swirl bread baking in the oven. The French bread was already sitting on the cutting board, crackly crust glistening in the sunlight streaming through the window. There was a note next to it too: 'LET IT SET FIRST'

"She's a forceful child, even in text," Nana said behind Haley, chortling.

"She's..." Haley stopped. "Definitely troubled. Do you think we can help her?"

"Oh, I don't know. God uses us all to His purposes, so if He thinks she needs us, well... here we are, aren't we? Here, hand me another corn muffin, dear. It's what I came for."

Haley stuck a knife in one of the muffins and patted some butter into it, knowing that would be the next request. "She can't stay that angry long, can she?"

"People do spend years angry. Depending on what's eating them, of course. But I don't think Jennifer is one of those types. She strikes me as a good child, normally."

What magical powers did old people develop to be able to see that kind of thing so easily? As she aged, would she be able to tell why people behaved the way they did, just from a few meetings? Haley wondered how many people she'd have to meet to accrue the right kind of life experience to make judgments like that. Was it scary that people were that predictable? Was *she* that predictable?

Silly question. Hadn't she grown up listening to the adults around her smile knowingly at her antics, as if they knew something she didn't?

Haley wrapped the muffin in a napkin and handed it over. "Where are you sitting?"

"The common room. There's a nice fire there, courtesy of our Ruth. So cozy! I am crocheting."

"Blankets for everyone this year?"

"What else?"

Haley laughed. "I'll read to you, if you want. Just let me roll out these cookies first."

Which is what they did, by the fire, with the Christmas tree twinkling in the corner and the fire popping from the occasional pine cone. Haley read the Christmas story from Luke, which was her favorite version of it, and Nana rocked and crocheted, and they had coffee dusted with cinnamon. The cookies came out of the oven, and Haley made a quick egg scramble for their breakfast, admiring the big orange yolks as she cracked them into the pan and whipped them with some goat cheese before they set.

Haley didn't think the morning could get more idyllic until the carolers returned.

"Delightful!" Nana said. "Come in, come in. Let me have a look at you. What a good-looking group you are! And you're here to sing for me!"

"And eat cookies!" one of the boys crowed.

Haley laughed. "I'll go get them while you get ready."

After that, they were serenaded with several songs: Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Santa Claus is Coming to Town, and O Come, O Come Emmanuel. The last was piercingly poignant; Haley had only heard it sung by adults, and associated it

particularly with deep male voices, so to hear it rendered by the pure sopranos of children, and against the backdrop of the inn's decorations....

"That was beautiful," Nana said. "You have brightened this old heart today."

"And this young one." Haley picked up the platter. "And all I have to thank you with are these!"

The children did not agree that cookies were a paltry offering compared to their music, and Haley sent them off with napkin-wrapped packages for later. Watching them go, laughing and shaking their jingle bell sticks, she didn't think her heart could get fuller. Bottling this feeling...

Nana was gathering the discarded plates from the noises behind her. "I'll just take care of this, shall I, since you handled everything else."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, I want to start planning dinner, anyway. You relax, cometing. Or... you could go upstairs, if you like?"

Was it too late to capture the experience of listening to the carolers? Haley made it up the stairs without breaking an ankle in her haste, waving to her grandmother in passing. She brought down her box of samples from the one ink advent calendar she'd gotten herself, hunting through them until she found a red called Noel—proper for singing, surely? She added a drop to an imbued Art vial, since music was an art, and tried to think what else. Obviously something from the actual location? She returned downstairs and picked some of the ash from the fireplace, and a drop of wax from one of the candles. What else? The music, the warmth of the fire, the smell from the candles and their light... she spotted a crumb from one of the cookies, not yet removed by the house, and laughed, adding it. "There, that might do it. Let's try."

She sat where she'd been for the impromptu concert, holding the vial cupped in her palms, focusing intently on her memory of the music, particularly of the final song, with the sweetness of the voices and the love in the verses. What it was like to be here, at the best time of year, waiting for Christmas day, with love in her heart and at her hearth.

Was she getting better at this? It felt easier, to make the connection between her choice of symbols and the real thing she was trying to capture. The vial grew warm in her hands, and when she peeked at it, there was a candle flame dancing in it. When she turned it, she glimpsed hints of evergreen boughs and the reflection of the fire on glass decorations.

[Essence of Christmas Memories]

[Platonic Material]

[This magical item embodies a beautiful memory of wholeness and joy.]

[Congratulations! You have transformed a third material and advanced to the next step in your profession questline!]

[You have earned 500 XP.]

[You have unlocked the profession quest: **A Perfect Blend!**]

[Creating a potion is a matter of will. Blend your ingredients with the correct intent and achieve your first potion to advance on your path.]

"I get the feeling that's more 'concentrate hard on what you want' stuff," Haley said. "Fortunately, I've had nothing to do lately but concentrate." She watched the flame flicker in her bottle. "I wonder if I would have been able to do any of this before the Trials? When it was easier to be distracted."

Across from her, the house started forming a slow spiral of light, drawing her attention. She watched all the way to the end, laughed. "All right, that's fair. I shouldn't be beating myself up about yesterday since I can concentrate now, is what you're saying." A dot formed, bounced emphatically. Haley smiled. "Thanks, I needed to hear it." She rose, petted the wall, and then headed back upstairs to create her capstone project.

Setting up for the potion required some work, because she wanted it to be perfect the first time. She bought another vial and imbued it, then hunted through her drawers until she found the washi tape that replicated a ruler. Taping it to the vial, she marked off thirds so she could get exact proportions. As she did, she wondered if using different proportions would give her different potions... but that was an experiment for after she succeeded the first time.

She worried a little that she wouldn't be able to pour her essences, but to her relief when she tipped the [Evergreen Essence] it became a clear liquid that shimmered green as it moved. One by one, she added the essences, until she'd filled her new vial. Then she capped it and... did *not* mix it, because what if it exploded? Potions exploded, didn't they? She took it outside onto the verandah, where it was a cold and glorious winter afternoon, all pale sunlight crisp on every branch. Sitting with her legs over the edge, she cradled the vial to her chest and closed her eyes. The ink that had inspired her had been named 'Winter Miracle,' but she'd never loved the name. What was miraculous about winter? The holiday was what made it special.

"Just in case speaking out loud matters," she said, "I am naming this potion Christmas Miracle. And now I'm... going to try to make it come together."

Nothing happened, which didn't surprise her. Alchemy was supposed to be hard, wasn't it? Or else everyone would be doing it. So she kept trying, and nothing kept happening. The rays of light changed color, started slanting across the trees rather than over them, and the sunset smoldered through the treeline. She watched it, and stopped thinking about what she should be doing, and that was maybe why it was still failing?

Her thoughts turned, inevitably, to prior Christmases. Waking up and going downstairs to help her mom make waffles, and then everyone bringing their plate to the Christmas tree, and passing out the gifts while eating... so messy but it had only

been the three of them, and they'd started doing it because Haley-the-child had been too impatient to eat breakfast before opening her presents so her mom had improvised....

For a moment, Haley was *there* again. Wasn't picturing it, but feeling it, as if she was existing in that breath of time. Her hands balancing a plate on one knee and a box on the other. Laughter. The scent of maple syrup and candy.

The vial in her hand ignited, and she gasped.

[Congratulations! You have created: **Special Potion of Christmas Magic!**]

[Potion Type: Healing/Empowering]

[This potion embodies the spirit of Christmas as it was understood by its maker.]

[You have created your first potion!]

[You have earned 1500 XP.]

[Congratulations! You have completed the profession quest **A Perfect Blend!**]

[You have earned 500 XP.]

[Final quest discovered: **Through the Gate**]

[You have uncovered the final step of your profession questline!]

[A potion unused is a potion wasted. Choose a recipient for your potion.]

Haley frowned. Hadn't her overarching quest required her to post the potion in the system store? She tried to call up her memory of it, and to her surprise, a new box floated into view, and with it, a log of her quests... which right now consisted only of the final step of her alchemy thread, and the original quest:

[Profession Questline: **The Cup of Human Kindness!**]

[You have been gifted a bottle for the purpose of crafting a potion by an altruistic colleague. Create one and post it on the system store.]

[Reward: Upgraded Profession, New Progression Paths, five basic potion bottles, 25 gold]

So she had remembered right. Why was the final step worded in a way that suggested she had a choice of what to do with her potion?

Even the quest name made her nervous—'through the gate' made her think about the caution about the narrow gate and the wide gate. She lifted the vial to the fading light and tilted it. Unlike her inks, the potion was the consistency and color of honey. Nothing about it revealed its magical properties—maybe it had to be drunk for those to manifest? "Did you say this was a healing potion? Does that mean we have health bars?"

This pause was definitely disapproving. Or... judgy, at least. How could she tell? Did it matter, when she was sure she could?

[Life is not a game.]

That answer made her feel enormously better. She sighed out. "No... it's not. I'm so glad you agree. Because that means the system isn't about gamifying our lives for entertainment. There's a purpose for it."

[The Trials exist to evaluate potential member species for intergalactic society.]

One that was fighting monsters....

[The universe is not safe.]

Haley looked up toward the ceiling. As if peeping out from hiding, the house sketched a dim spiral of light up there. Was Ruth distressed? It was a little scary but the world wasn't safe. That was nothing new, as Nana had pointed out to Haley not even a month ago, when she was contemplating the inn quest. "So if we don't have health bars," she said slowly, "how do healing potions work?"

[Individual survival is governed by the will to live. Anything that empowers the will is a healing agent.]

"Oh," Haley whispered. Because that meant everything she and Nana did here helped. It seemed ridiculous that baking a cookie or giving someone a place to sleep might heal them, but the aliens weren't wrong. Sometimes the most frail-looking people survived because they decided to, and the strongest people just... fell apart. And that was something inside them working, that their biology was only part of. "Thank you," she said more clearly. "For explaining. I appreciate it."

The aliens didn't reply this time, and it made her imagine some kind of room full of them with headsets, answering a million calls from Earth as humans bumbled their way through the Trials. That made her giggle, but so tiredly she was starting to worry that she was going to fall asleep without eating. She wanted to try Duplicating the potion, to see if she could, but right now getting downstairs felt like enough of an effort that she didn't want to risk messing up. "Dinner," she said. "Then I'll figure out what to do about you."

Over bowls of steaming chicken noodle soup augmented by Nana's Hearth Sage skills, Haley told her grandmother about her efforts and the results.

"A potion! Will you be doing that instead of enchanting with your scrolls, then?"

"I like to think it's a 'both' situation? I wouldn't want to give up calligraphy, especially now that it's useful." Haley dipped some of Jennifer's French bread in the soup. "That sounds terrible. But it used to be a hobby that people thought was a little weird, and now it's something that powers stoves and makes magic items. Potion-making is also fun, but it's a different kind of fun. If I can do both..."

"No reason not to try," Nana agreed. "Becoming a Hearth Sage opened some new doors to me as well that I admit I like quite a bit, since they involve sitting."

Haley giggled. "Really?"

"Oh yes! If I sit by the fire and read or crochet, I now create useful auras that other people benefit from!"

"Maybe we should start a quilting circle!"

Nana shuddered. "Sewing without a machine! I would rather not. But a weekly get-together here would be lovely. It is an inn, and we have all this nice room..." She paused.

"Did you just get a prompt?" Haley asked, grinning. "Maybe to host an event? You did, didn't you?"

"Would you mind, little comet? It would mean people coming by more often..."

"I think it would be nice. Like you said, we have all this room."

"Excellent. Then we'll see how many old biddies I can attract."

Haley nodded. "Just as long as you don't mind us spring chickens too. I think it would be fun to come by and learn some things from older and wiser people."

"So long as you realize not all old people are wise..."

Haley thought of Jennifer and how useful it would be to pick other people's brains about how to handle her, especially people who might have seen dozens of teens like her. "Maybe not, but that doesn't mean I can't still learn from them!"

After dinner, Haley wandered to her room and collapsed on her bed. She hadn't perceived the potion-making to be hard work, but now that she wasn't moving she wanted to continue not moving, preferably all night.

[Broadcast message: Congratulations! The Blue Cypress United Methodist Church has accrued sufficient contribution points to be confirmed as a Sanctuary!]

Haley sat up, eyes wide.

[Refuge now has five of the six amenities required to qualify as a System Township. Discover and arrange for the final amenity to be added to the map and become eligible for town benefits.]

[You have earned 100 XP.]

“Wait, what did I do?”

[Experience is awarded to all people who donated contribution points.]

“Oh, nice. I wonder...” She pushed herself off the bed and headed for the loft. As she climbed it, she heard the sound of bells. When she reached the lookout, she stared in the direction of town... because the church now had a new tower, one that was glowing faintly. Like a beacon. “Wow,” she whispered.

From the stairwell, Nana called, “Are those church bells, Haley?”

Haley scampered down and helped her grandmother up the steps so they could both look.

“God Almighty,” Nana said. “A bell tower. There was talk decades ago about adding one, but the money was never there. This has something to do with the Sanctuary, I imagine.”

“You saw that? I guess everyone did, then.” Haley looked toward the church. “It’s beautiful, though.”

“I do love bell song,” Nana said. “And we’ll have a way for everyone to tell what time it is, if they ring it as they just did.”

Haley paused, because she hadn’t noticed any pattern to the ringing. “What did they do?”

“There’s a song that comes in four parts,” Nana said. “That tells you which quarter of the hour it is. And on the hour, it will toll, and the number of gongs is the hour.” She glanced at Haley, shook her head. “You’ve never heard a grandfather clock ring? I know your parents have on.”

“It doesn’t make any noise, though! Mom said it bothered her.”

“You get used to it,” Nana said. “And then you don’t think of it anymore. What a view this is! I think I’ll linger.”

“I think I’ll shower and go to bed,” Haley said. “It’s been a long day.”

She’d planned to make a decision about the potion, too, but by the time she got back to her room, freshly washed and pajama-clad, Tom was already in bed, purring. Petting him seemed preferable to thinking, so she did that, and fell asleep with her slippers still on.

Potion brewing must have taken more out of her than she anticipated, because Haley didn’t wake up until it was light out. Squinting toward her clock, she started. “Is it really three hours after dawn already? How did I sleep in so late?”

Beside her, Tom rolled over and draped a leg over her ankle.

“Yes, I know you don’t want me to move, but I have Christmas presents to make and breakfast to eat!” Haley paused in the act of throwing the covers off. Did she want to deal with Jennifer? But the thought of grabbing a cup of cocoa and

heading up to the loft to straighten out her thoughts was too attractive. She girded her figurative loins and threw a robe on over her pajamas for good measure, then headed downstairs to set a good example.

Except Jennifer wasn't there.

Bewildered, Haley stood in the kitchen—the empty kitchen, because it no longer felt quiet or peaceful. Now there was an expectation, and unfulfilled, the kitchen felt incomplete. Jennifer might have been awful to deal with, but she was industrious, and she loved making bread, and that mattered more than her attitude. Was she all right? What had caused her to stay home? Haley sank into a chair and looked at the pristine counters, and the sun gleaming on the fixtures of the sink. Maybe it was something innocuous. Her parents had asked for her help? Maybe like Haley, she'd slept in?

"She didn't come by, did she, Ruth?"

The house drew a line across the side door and then melted the glistening beads of light down until they vanished.

"So it wasn't a 'she decided at the last minute she'd had enough of us,'" Haley said. "I'll give her an hour and then go see her, I guess." She summoned a smile. "At least I can make breakfast in peace."

One day there would be hogs and then there would be bacon. But fresh eggs were still so novel that being able to eat them felt like a blessing. She did sunny side up this time, made a pot of coffee big enough for visitors, and toasted rounds of yesterday's French bread, and felt like a queen when she sat to eat.

Her first visitor finally arrived while she was cleaning, but it wasn't Jennifer. Haley hastily wiped her hands off and leaned down to pet Mumps, who had skidded in and was grinning at her with wagging tail. Finding a place to scratch that wasn't covered by his armor was a bit of a challenge, but under the chin still worked.

"Who's the best boy?"

"Hi, Miss Haley," Billy said from the side door. "I heard there were cookies here yesterday...."

Haley eyed him. "Why don't you have a real breakfast instead?"

"That sounds great too!"

She picked out another couple of eggs, held them up.

"Oooh, I like 'em scrambled!"

Haley nodded and cracked them into the still warm pan, bumping Mumps until he moved over. "Doing magic lessons?"

"I just got back from them! Mr. Ellis says I'm not patient enough but stubbornness will do."

That sounded exactly like something Mr. Ellis would say, enough that Haley betted it was verbatim. "So what are you learning now?"

Billy embarked on a rambling explanation of the various magical abilities he was trying to recreate with Mr. Ellis's help, "because grown-ups who've never played computer games might not know what a fireball is, or a magic missile," and Haley

listened in amusement, because she highly doubted Mr. Ellis was as ignorant as Billy imagined. But as a scientist, he was probably trying to figure out how the system worked, not how he thought it might work. Somehow, the explanation kept going while Billy inhaled the plate of eggs and toast and drank an entire cup of goat milk.

When he was done, the boy sighed. "Thanks, Miss Haley. That was a great second breakfast."

"Second!" she said, laughing. "Don't tell me you've already eaten!"

"Well, sure! I always eat before I go out. Magic takes work!" Billy sat up. "Also, I wanted to tell you that Jennifer's not coming. I was hoping she'd get up while I was gone, but I guess not."

"Is she sick?"

"Nah, she's doing one of those 'I can't face the world' things she's been doing lately." Billy shrugged. "She was doing a little better when she was coming here, but last night she just fell apart and hasn't come out of her room since. I bet it's because of the church becoming a sanctuary, because she said something about everything being ruined."

"Do you think she'd like a visitor?" Haley asked, hesitant.

Billy snorted. "No." He glanced up at her. "You really want to see her? I know she was probably awful to you."

Haley sat on her first response and remembered Nana's observation. "A little, yeah. Was she always like that, though?"

"Nah. She was pretty cool before the apocalypse. Still uptight, but not mean. If she said she was gonna do something, she would, and Dad says that's the 'first principle.' That you should be a man of your word. Or girl, I guess. Hey, this is her bread, isn't it? It tastes like her French bread."

"It is," Haley said. "She's really good."

"She always has been! Sometimes she let me help, before she got busy with school stuff. She got so stressed, she wasn't fun to be around anymore." He wrinkled his nose. "If being a teenager means I end up like that, I'm not doing it."

"I... don't think being a teenager is going to be the same anymore," Haley said. "High school drama doesn't rate when you have to go kill mutated gators to keep them from eating the town's food supply."

Billy perked up. "Is that a real thing? Should I get started?"

Haley started to say 'no' and then sighed. "Yes, probably."

"Aw, sweet! I'm heading to the post office right now!"

Billy and Mumps's departure emptied the kitchen of energy. In the pool of tranquility that remained, Haley washed the dishes and thought about Jennifer. Would things have gone differently had Haley known this new information? Because the picture she had of Jennifer now was different. Someone who needed a friend badly, or at least, someone to talk to who was willing to listen, instead of dismiss her fears and worries. Setting the last dish back in the pantry, Haley discovered she had

a plan. She went for the flour and said, "Any help you can give me, Ruth, I'd appreciate... because I am *not* the baker Jennifer is."

The house drew a row of lights over the counter, then scattered them all over the kitchen.

[New aura detected!]

[Aura of Inspiration]

[Encourages everyone within range to exceed their capabilities, utilizing the accumulated memories of activities done in the area as empowerment and inspiration.]

[This aura is temporary.]

"Oh, nice! Thank you!"

A shy pink spiral appeared on the pantry door where Haley was rummaging.

"Let's see what we can do."

It was nearly three hours later that Haley finally headed to the post office, following the bobbing tag associated with Billy. She found him throwing a stick for Mumps on the street and stood to watch for a few minutes, grinning. Was there anything more ridiculous than a dog in armor patched together from a broken-down leather sofa rushing down the street, puffing white breath in the cold, and leaping five feet in the air for a stick? "Your dog's armor class is too much for that poor twig," she told Billy.

"You're right, next time I should set it on fire!" At her aghast look, Billy chortled. "I'm *kidding*, Miss Haley. I wouldn't set Mumps on fire."

"I'm so glad—"

"He'd stink really bad if he was singed..."

"Billy!"

He slapped his knee, laughing. "You're too easy, Miss Haley."

"I guess I am. But then, I wouldn't be as funny to be around if I wasn't, would I?" Haley grinned and handed over her basket. "Here. This is for your sister. Could you take it to her? It's even a quest."

"Oooh, swell! But I'd do that without a quest."

"Still... I think this kind of thing is traditional for games, right? Questgivers who send you to various other people to do deliveries?"

"Good point! I'll take it right away, then."

Haley waved as the boy took off running, Mumps falling in alongside. And sighed. There went her chance at completing her questline anytime soon. But she could always make a new potion... and if anyone needed to be restored by the spirit of Christmas, it was Jennifer.

Haley spent the next few hours making protection amulets for her friends for Christmas, entertaining herself by picking out likely looking pebbles to string on leather cords made, appropriately, from deer that Eudolie and Jean-Baptiste still occasionally brought them to eat. Her existing Protection scroll was basic, so she went to work on improving it, and in the process discovered she could modify it with a second ink. Using her [Ink of Cold], she could make an enchantment that resisted cold; with the [Ink of Potent Strength], she improved the quality of the scroll; her [Dark Flint Ink] created a protection against piercing damage, and the [Shadow Ink] made a scroll that protected against ambushes and other forms of sneak attacks.

It was so much fun that she almost missed lunch, so it was fortunate the Nana had decided to fry the chicken delivered to her by Mr. Collins. After that, she helped her grandmother tidy the kitchen, then saw her off. "Do you suppose," Nana said while putting on her shoes, "the aliens have done something to my body? Walking doesn't seem as hard anymore."

"Maybe?" Haley said. "They've never said anything to me about fundamental changes to our bodies or anything. Not like games where your body's powers are measured in stats and you can raise them to get better at being strong, or fast, or healthier. But that doesn't mean something's going on."

"It could be that things are just so interesting now that I can't resist investigating!" Nana's eyes sparkled. "Why, I might run into a monstrous possum on the street and have to pelt it with muffins!"

Haley giggled. "If you get a muffin-throwing attack, let me know."

Nana kissed her cheek. "I will share the skill with you, and then you can build me a muffin-throwing catapult. We'll take on all comers!"

After her grandmother's departure, Haley made herself some hot cocoa while humming 'It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.' Nana didn't have any cute Santa hats, but maybe someone in town had one she could buy or barter for? But what would be a good trade for a Santa hat? Santa cookies, naturally. That made her think of gingerbread, and she had half-convinced herself to make some when the chime sounded. "Come on in," she called. "I'm in the kitchen."

When she turned, Jennifer was standing in the door from the common room, holding the basket in one arm, and in the opposite hand... the potion.

"I don't know what game you think you're playing—"

"I'm not playing a game—"

"—but I don't want this in my house! This is... this is everything I'm angry about! It's wrong, and it doesn't belong in this world and I don't want it!"

The raised hand, the tremor in Jennifer's shoulder... Haley lunged forward, but not in time to stop the other girl from dashing the potion to the ground. It struck the wooden floor and the glass shattered, golden droplets exploding out from the

point of contact like honey lace. The screech of the vial breaking, the violence of it, lasted a heartbeat...

...and then a wave rolled out, engulfing them both, bathing the kitchen in radiance. Haley gulped in, shocked by a procession of memories of Christmases with her family, with the happiness and love of it, the excitement of gift-giving and feasts. Even the disappointments and fights were part of it, like shadows from that great light, necessary contrast. She smelled the gingerbread she hadn't made, and would make in the future, and the evergreens, heard children singing.

And then the sensations faded, and Jennifer slumped to the ground, sobbing. Haley started and went to her and hugged her, and was surprised not to be pushed away. Surprised, and glad, because watching someone cry this hard without trying to comfort them would have been painful.

"I can't—even—go to church anymore, because they've made it into a g-g-game."

Haley breathed deeply, letting her frustration go. She petted Jennifer's back and said, "God never leaves us."

That inspired a fresh round of tears. When it was over, Jennifer forced herself upright and wiped her eyes with a shuddering snuffle. "My parents used to buy one another things at the dollar store so they could use all their money for gifts for me and Billy."

This change of subject caught Haley by surprise. She offered the kitchen towel stuffed into her apron to Jennifer, who used it on her face.

"They never told us, of course. I heard one year when I sneaked out of my room to see if I could catch them putting out presents for us." Jennifer's smile was wan. "I thought I was so sophisticated. I knew there was no Santa Claus and I wanted to be able to say I knew it because I'd seen them doing it. But they were sitting in front of the tree and laughing together, quietly. Dad got Mom a plastic bracelet... she got him a cheap lighter. After that I noticed we never saw them exchanging gifts. It was always me and Billy. And enough food for something special at Christmas." Composing herself with a deep breath, Jennifer said, "I was going to be the first one in the family to go to college. I worked hard so I could get a scholarship, and I was going to study... something that could help us. Business, or accounting... something I could make money with, and then... then maybe Mom and Dad would have enough to buy real gifts for one another." She looked up, eyes watery. "What am I going to do now to help them? All my dreams are gone."

"Oh, Jennifer," Haley said, and this time they both cried as Haley hugged her.

When they were both done, Jennifer got to her feet. "Where's your dustpan? I'll help clean up."

Together they found all the glass shards and mopped. After they were done, Haley said, "I'm sorry my bread wasn't as good as yours."

"It... wasn't bad. Not too bad." Jennifer slumped into a chair. "I'm sorry I'm so awful to you. And everyone else. I don't know how to stop feeling like this."

"You had a plan. A really important one. And it got taken away from you," Haley said. She poured some of the hot cocoa out and put it in front of her guest. "I don't think you should be upset that you haven't bounced back from that immediately."

"Everyone else seems to be dealing with it fine."

"Maybe?" Haley shook her head. "But maybe not. There are people who are unhappy and uncertain about what's going on, I'm sure." She filled her own cup and peeked in the refrigerator to see if the whipped cream she'd made earlier had fallen yet. Still good—she brought it out and added a dollop to her cup before bringing the rest of it to the table. "And you're not useless, you know."

"I can bake bread. Great. Not much help when everyone's out..." She waved a hand. "Killing monsters and casting fireballs."

Haley winced. "You know about that, then."

"Billy? Of course I do." Jennifer eyed her rebelliously. "I still think it's witchcraft."

"That's fair. I have trouble with things too, sometimes."

Jennifer snorted. "You? The perfect Miss Haley?"

"Well, I accidentally created a clock that could tell the future, and then I hurt its feelings by saying I couldn't use it because divination was wrong."

Jennifer stared at her. "Seriously?"

Rueful, Haley nodded.

"I don't know what to think of that," Jennifer said. "But it's a little funny. Maybe."

"That's... about how I feel about it."

Jennifer smiled. It was the first smile Haley had seen on her face, and it transformed her from sulky teen to movie star sweetness. "Oh no," she blurted. "I hope you don't think Jean-Baptiste is an awful person for being Catholic because I think he's going to want to ask you out."

"W-what?"

"The world ends, but boys still want to date?"

Helplessly, Jennifer fell to laughing as hysterically as she had been crying, and Haley joined her and felt that some of the poison had drained away from them both.

"More seriously," Haley said, "You shouldn't disparage baking. It's a lot more important now than it was before, when there were commercial bakeries and grocery stores. Food has to come from somewhere and for now it's coming from us. All those people killing monsters need to eat. Why should they eat raw nuts and berries when they can have good bread and soup?" Haley brightened as she imagined it. "You could make a lot of money that way, actually. Selling your bread. Become the town's first official baker. That's as good as getting a business degree... you could earn things to bring home to your family to help them now, in the world that exists as it is."

"You really think so?"

Haley nodded. "I do. You already know you're good at it. Why shouldn't you be compensated for it? We could help you set up your own store, even."

Jennifer was silent for several moments, staring at her cocoa without seeming to see it. Then, "And... if I wanted to keep baking bread here?"

"Then we'd pay you," Haley said promptly. "And if you ever change your mind, we'll do whatever you need to get started."

"You mean that." Jennifer wiped her face again with the butt of a palm. "Of course you mean it. You're as nice as Billy said." Her smile was wobbly. "He's a good judge of character, for a ten-year-old boy."

"It's probably your dad's fault," Haley said. "All those sayings about integrity got to him."

Jennifer giggled. "It's funny to hear them coming out of someone so young, isn't it? I love it."

"Me too," Haley admitted. And slowly, because she didn't want to damage their détente but it needed saying, "You know God is still real and hasn't abandoned us."

Jennifer rolled her lower lip between her teeth and worried it, then nodded. "I know," she said at last. "That was wrong of me. Blaming Him because I felt like I lost my chance to help. And... I was proud of myself, for getting the scholarship. I wanted to be the first person with a college diploma. It was my dream, too, for myself." She winced. "That was part of what made me so angry. That I knew it was unfair of me to be thinking of myself too."

"It wasn't unfair, but it wasn't helpful either," Haley said. "And before you say anything, the reason I know is because my head is *full* of unhelpful thoughts about things not being fair." She sighed. "I'm working on that."

Jennifer laughed. "Are you always this honest?"

"Maybe too often," Haley admitted.

"Well, I like it. And if you're willing to put up with me..." Jennifer shook her head. "I... can't promise I'm always going to be easy to live with. And I still think most of this is... just wrong. I resent having the world changed in a way that seems contrary to what God intended. I don't like magic. I don't know how to make it make sense."

"That's all right," Haley said. "We don't expect you to be perfect. And I'm glad you're not sure about those things, because I could use someone to make me really think about things I would otherwise accept because they're cool."

Jennifer nodded. And added shyly, "I'm sorry I broke your gift."

Haley smiled. "That's all right. I think you were supposed to." She glanced at the angle of the sunlight falling through the window. "It's getting pretty late for bread-baking, but maybe we could make something for supper? You could take home half of it."

"I'd like that."

Haley left Nana's dinner in stasis for her and put a note on the counter, then trudged up the stairs. "So," she said, "I guess I sort of failed my quest." She checked her log.

[**Through the Gate** status: complete!]

[**The Cup of Human Kindness** status: in progress]

'In progress' was better than 'failed.' She sighed. "Well, at least I know how to make potions now. I can make a new one for the store to fulfill the questline. And I can't really complain about how I used up my first, because... that was a good thing. A needful thing, like my mom would say."

Pacing her up the stairwell, Ruth drew a spiral of light that coiled and uncoiled with each step Haley took. Seeing it made her smile, and she patted it. "You're right. This isn't a setback at all. I've learned a lot, and I helped someone, and both those things matter. A quest is... like these stairs. It's steps upward, and sometimes you have to take them slowly." She thought of Billy and laughed. "I don't have to be patient as long as I'm stubborn."

The lights tied themselves in knots and bounced as if laughing along.

"Right," Haley said. "Let's get back to work!" She opened the door to her room and shrieked. "TOM!"

The cat was sitting in the middle of her room, licking a paw, and behind him was a raccoon. Sitting on her chair, examining one of her pens.

"No no no, you cannot have that!"

The raccoon's ears drooped and he set the pen down, patted it.

"NO," Haley said. "I don't care how cute you look, you cannot have my shiny things. Tom, what... what is this critter doing in my ROOM? You're supposed to be guarding the house!"

The cat lifted his head to inspect her through half-lidded eyes. A prompt leaped up in front of her.

[Creature has applied to open post: **House Guard, Exterior, Aerial**]

"You have got to be kidding me. How is a raccoon an aerial—"

The raccoon leaped from her chair onto the top of the shelving unit. The one that held all her inks. The bottles shivered, clacking against one another.

Haley rushed for them. "Get down from there!"

The next few minutes were not among Haley's proudest, because the raccoon merrily led her on a chase around her room without ever knocking anything down. She, on the other hand...

"At least nothing broke," she said at last from the floor where she was lying down. "All right, I'm convinced. Accept the raccoon."

[Guard accepted. All posts are now filled. Evolve your inn to open more posts.]
[Name Aerial Guardian now?]

“Trouble,” Haley said. “His name is definitely Trouble.”

[Name accepted.]

Turning her face toward Tom, who hadn’t moved, Haley said, “I’m forced to admit you’ve done a good job with this. Thanks for looking out for us, you crazy cat. Can you take the critter out of the house before I murder him, though?”

The raccoon made a noise that sounded a lot like a snicker and leaped off her desk. A few moments later he was out the window.

Haley sighed and... didn’t get up. She had presents to make, but for now she didn’t want to move. There was so much going on in her head: Jennifer’s confession, their almost comfortable session cooking together, the potion’s power, the memories it had evoked, how those memories mingled with her fears and uncertainties about a future that included magic and confused people about whether life was a game. She didn’t want that, no matter how cool it was in other ways.

She was still on the floor when a diffident knock interrupted her ruminations. “Come in.”

Nana opened the door and had a good look at her. “Long day, I’m guessing.”

“I have so much to tell you.”

“Then I will sit on your bed next to the cat, and listen.”

Haley poured it all out: her questline, the potion making, Billy’s visit, then Jennifer’s and the subsequent revelations. Their cooking in the kitchen. Then all her concerns and fears. She even told Nana about the clock, causing her grandmother to peek at it and agree that whatever it had been, it was mostly harmless now.

“I think that’s everything.”

“That’s a great deal, cometling.”

“Are you going to tell me things that make it all better?”

Nana smiled. “Could I?”

Haley stared at the ceiling. “I think... when I was younger, I wanted the grown-ups around me to have all the answers. And I still wish they did. But the answers aren’t easy things anymore, are they?”

“No. Because the questions aren’t either.”

“And I get that now,” Haley said, sitting up and rubbing her forehead. “The questions are big, too big to have straightforward fixes.”

“It means the answers are also big, and not straightforward,” Nana said. “Like God loving us. And our lives having meaning, despite pain. And things happening for a reason.”

Haley sighed. "Yes. And maybe hearing that helps more, once you've decided you're okay with the complexities. Because a simple answer would feel false, wouldn't it." She thought about it, nodded. "If Jennifer would suddenly be fine tomorrow, that wouldn't be satisfying. Because it's not how the real world works."

"You hardly need all that elderly wisdom I've arranged for you to have with the weekly quilting bee! What will I do now?"

"Make cookies with me, I hope," Haley said. "Because just hanging around you is the real treasure."

Nana laughed. "What a beautiful answer, and so calculated to make me feel special. It's almost as if you want me to make cookies for you right now!"

"I wouldn't mind it. Though maybe brownies this time..." She thought. "Peppermint brownies. For Christmas."

"Deal. I'll go set out the ingredients. You'll have a few things you'll want to do first."

"Oh?"

Nana plucked a used spice container out of her cardigan pocket and handed it over. "There you go, dear. I'll see you shortly."

Puzzled, Haley watched her go, then unscrewed the metal cap and looked inside. And gasped at the single honeyed drop inside. The smell of bruised evergreen fronds rose to her on a wave. "But... it was all gone! Where did this come from?"

On the floor beside her knee, a hesitant circle of light bloomed.

Looking down at it, Haley said, "Don't tell me you somehow saved it?"

The circle tightened, twirled, and dimmed.

"Oh, Ruth...! Thank you!" Haley scrambled to her feet. A few moments later, a fresh vial fell onto her bed from the system store and she imbued it with the spirit powder. Carefully, she tipped the spice container until the single drop of the potion fell inside. "This may still not be enough, but if it is..." She screwed the cap onto the vial and sucked in a breath. "I'd like to donate this potion to the store, please."

How many heartbeats went by while she waited? Did counting them matter when her heart was racing?

[Potion accepted.]

[Congratulations! You have completed the quest **The Cup of Human Kindness!**]

[Your profession is evolving...]

[Evaluating skills, actions, and inclinations...]

[Congratulations! You have acquired a new profession class: Spiritcrafter!]

[The Spiritcrafter uses various enchanting and alchemy skills in pursuit of magical items that heal and empower the spirit. This support class is available only to those concerned with the welfare of those around them, who also have a creative bent unlimited by a desire to use a single crafting process.]

Haley's eyes widened. She felt almost like she had been given a gift too large for her hands. As if she should exclaim, 'for me, really?' And it made her laugh. "Oh... that's so perfect. Thank you, aliens. I promise I'll use it for good. Obviously, you already noticed that about me."

[You have earned 2500 XP!]

A bundle fell on her bed, bouncing on her afghans. "That must be the potion bottles. And..." She checked the store, and she did, in fact, have another 25 gold. "Nice!" And then, surprising herself, she started crying. Which was extra ridiculous, because she was relieved and happy and... did it matter? It had been a long couple of days. Rubbing her face, she glanced at the clock.

Two Hours After Dinner One Minute to Feeling Better

She chuckled. "You're right, and since you were trying to cheer me up with that, I'll let it pass. But remember, no prophecies."

The clock flashed the display, as if agreeing, and she got up. Jennifer's cinnamon swirl bread would make a great snack to power her through her Christmas gifts or... she glanced outside. She could brew a cup of tea and sit on the verandah and be thankful for a while. Think about the spirit of Christmas, and how lucky she was, and how grateful to be here. Pray for her parents' safety, and for all the people she cared about, and maybe just relax. When she glanced at the clock, it said:

Three Hours of Quiet Until Bed

"You're right," she said. "That's definitely the better plan." And went to make her tea, content.