

Noir Fantasy

[WP] The protagonist is entirely overprepared for the wrong genre. They make it work.

I stuck the end of my cigarette into the roaring brazier near my table. A long drag filled my lungs with sweet nicotine, and relief flooded through my muscles. It had been damn near two days since I'd had a cigarette; there was just the one pack in my pocket when I found myself here, and I had to make it last. Nowhere in this world seemed to carry my brand, after all. Or even have cigarettes in the first place. Sorcerors, giants, ogres, potions, magic... sure. But no cigarettes. Just my luck, I guess.

"Excuse me?" A voice asked, barely loud enough to be heard over the roaring din of the tavern. "Are you... are you the Man in Black?"

I looked down at my suit. It was pinstriped, but no one in this world seemed to know what that was. Everyone here wore heavy robes and wolf furs and crap like that. And not a single man had the decency to wear a proper hat, or a tie. "I suppose I am," I answered, tipping the brim of my trilby back to get a good look at him and gulping down a mouthful of booze. "What's it to you?"

He fidgeted, looking at the empty chair across from me. I nodded for him to take a seat. "I need your help, good sir. I've heard that you... that you can help people"

I grimaced. You help *one* damsel in distress from a band of roadside bandits, and you're stuck in the gig for life. I was apparently already developing *that* reputation once again. I guess some things never change. Even across worlds, you can't escape who you are. And for me, that meant bad news. Who I was before wasn't a very pretty sight, and I wasn't keen on slipping back into that pit of despair. "What can I do for you?" I asked the man.

"It's my daughter," he said. "She was kidnapped in the night from our home in Fareshold!" *It's always about a girl*, I told myself. Same old story since the beginning of time.

I drained the rest of my drink. It wasn't whiskey, but it had the same burn going down my gullet and that was good enough for me. "How's about the next round is on you," I asked the man, "and you can tell me all about it?"

He nodded and signaled to the bartender, a willowy man nearly seven feet tall with a long nose and pointed ears. Maybe "man" isn't the term I should be using any more,

considering how many various types there were in this world. At the other end of the bar, a set of Dwarves drank from gigantic mead steins, and lurking in the shadows was what looked like a living rock, eating from a plate of gravel. This was a strange place, but who the hell was I to judge?

"We know who took her," the man continued. "Glaurian the Dread!"

"Yeah, yeah." The bartender came over with our liquor. My patron sipped at his booze like a bird and grimaced, while I drained mine and called for another before the elf had even walked away. "So this Glaurian guy. Friend of yours? Maybe he's got a score to settle with you?" That was always the case. Someone gets on the wrong side of the mob, and it comes to bite them on the ass. This world may have magic and monsters, but that didn't mean people didn't still get in the same types of trouble. "You owe him money or something?"

"He already stole all of my gold for his hoard!" the man complained, wringing his hands. *Of course*, I thought. One other thing that never changes is that my clients are always deadbeats, unable to pay me for my service. *Just great*.

"Uh huh. So what's he want with your girl, then?"

The man cocked his head, like it was an odd question. "Well... that... that's just what Dragons do!" he finally cried. "Who knows why?!"

I laughed. "Dragons, huh?" Maybe this world would present some new challenges after all. "All right, pal. I'll take the case."

The brazier fire was now down to just glowing red coals. Looking at it made me yearn for another cigarette. Nearby, the group of dwarves were all slumped over the table with spilled mead soaking into their beards. They may be stout, but that doesn't mean that those short little guys can hold their liquor. Glancing around, I realized that most of the other tables were empty too. Mr. Aletho, my new client, had gotten a bit tipsy after finishing his one drink and shortly found his way up to bed. The living boulder had rolled back outside at some point, and the fur-clad men with axes strapped to their shoulders had all left as well.

Only one other table was still occupied. The man sat alone, with his long white beard arranged in a little pile in front of him. He held a goblet in his hand, but it wasn't any kind of drink that I'd ever seen: bright yellow bubbles and purple sparks came shooting

out of it every few seconds. His robes were lime green, but covered with old stains and holes. There was a staff leaning on the back of his chair, leading me to conclude that he was some sort of wizard. If I were to see this guy on the streets back home, I probably would have crossed to the other sidewalk to avoid him. Woulda pegged him as stark raving mad, no doubt.

But I wasn't home, was I? I had no contacts here to slip me a little insider information now and then, and no low-life thugs that I could find to wring something useful out of 'em. I didn't even know who all the players were in this game; I'd heard a bit about some noblemen and kings, some thieves, a mage's guild... but the hierarchy wasn't exactly clear yet. And there's always someone running things from the shadows. So if I was ever going to make any progress, I'd have to go outside my comfort zone.

I rose from my table and approached the wizard. As I walked, I felt that eerie tingling sensation of being watched, which I was *far* too familiar with. But looking around the tavern, the only other conscious person was the elf bartender who was too focused on cleaning up the puddle under the dwarves' table to pay me any mind. So I shook it off and stood in front of the wizard. "Hey, pal. Mind if I have a seat?" He was too busy mumbling to himself and staring off into space to answer me. "I'll take that as a no," I decided on his behalf. The chair squeaked against the stone floor as it emerged from under the table, and I sat across from the wizard. His eyes bulged out like a bug, and I had to make a conscious effort to hide my look of disgust. *I've seen plenty worse*, I reminded myself. "You know anything about *dragons*, pal?"

That word seemed to snap him out of whatever funk he was in. "Oh ho! Dragons! Those fiery sons of Algathor, eh?" He grinned, revealing crooked yellow teeth.

"Errrr... sure." That name meant nothing to me, but the wizard seemed pretty confident about it so I let it go. "You know where I can find them? Specifically one named Glaurian?"

He cackled and spread his arms, knocking his goblet to the floor. The liquid sloshed out and began eating holes through the flagstones until the floor looked like swiss cheese. But the wizard hardly noticed. "Where the sun hides from the moon!" he answered. "And Algathor's breath burns the Acordia Tree!"

I rolled my eyes. "Right." A mouth full of gibberish that meant nothing to me. "Could you maybe draw me a map, buddy?" But I'd already lost his attention. He'd gone back to muttering to himself and staring off into space. I stayed for a moment longer, then got out of the seat. "Well, thanks anyway."

Above me, a chain rattled ever so softly. Someone who wasn't trained to pick up on these types of things probably wouldn't have heard it. But I'd been followed into dark alleys too many times to not be aware of such small details. Looking up, the chandelier swung a few inches back and forth and the flames of the candles flickered softly as it swayed, maybe caught in a strong breeze. But the narrow glass windows of the tavern were all closed, and covered in such a thick layer of grime that I doubted they could even open at all. Neither the elven bartender nor the crazy wizard seemed to have noticed. And there was nothing up there that would have caused it to sway.

I shook my head. "This world never makes sense," I muttered. Then I waved goodbye to the bartender and informed him that I was going to go sleep it off in a gutter somewhere. I'd chosen to spend what little coin I'd managed to get (from saving that young dame on the road) to buy booze and food instead of a bed for the night. The elf barely even looked up from his mopping as I barged out the door, making sure that I appeared as intoxicated and incoherent as possible. Then I immediately dashed to the side and pressed myself up against the wall of the tavern.

I waited in silence. The streets outside the tavern were empty, but the moons (yeah, that's right: there were two of them) and the stars were bright enough to see everything clearly. My heart thudded in my chest, from the mix of excitement and a high blood alcohol content. And yet nothing happened. Just when I was starting to think that I was imagining things (it wouldn't be the first time), the tavern door opened... and no one walked out.

I held my breath, maintaining absolute silence. I'd been caught in the act of spying quite a few times, but I didn't have my gun here to shoot my way out of any messes here. I heard light footsteps, but there was no one to make them.

And then a girl materialized straight out of thin air. *Invisibility*, I realized. *Nice trick*. She couldn't have been more than twenty, with long dark curls. And she wore all black: black boots, stockings, a long black coat, and a black mask over her face. *Real inconspicuous*, I thought to myself. *Dress like a villain from the funnies; that won't raise any suspicions, darling*. She peered down the street, no doubt trying to catch a glimpse of where I'd teetered off to.

I sprang forward and grabbed her, switchblade in my hand in an instant. "What's the big idea, doll? Why are you following me?" I hissed into her ear.

She gasped, but recovered her cool soon enough. "Because maybe you're not the only one looking for a dragon," she answered.

We stood outside the tavern together with my knife hovering just over her throat. Most people who stalked me out of bars and into the night generally weren't on their way to volunteer their help; they were always gorilla-sized thugs looking to use my guts as a punching bag. But being followed by a petite (and honestly pretty gorgeous) lady was something new. "That so?" I asked, lowering the knife but keeping it clutched in my palm. I'd earned enough scars to learn that lesson long ago. "You know where to find 'em?"

She turned toward me and straightened her coat. The look in her eye made it clear that *she* wasn't used to be taken by surprise, and didn't take kindly to getting a taste of her own medicine. "They're *dragons*," she spat out like I was simple. "They don't nest in one place for very long; everyone knows that." Her eyes narrowed, and she took me in from my scuffed black shoes all the way up to my hat. "You're... not from around here, are you?"

I took a look around at the stone storefronts, thatched roofs, the alchemy supplies in the window of the nearest shop, and the enormous medieval castle looming over the entire village. "That would be an understatement," I answered.

The girl also glanced around the streets. "Come on," she whispered. "It's not safe to talk here." She grabbed my hand, and we took off running. Out of breath, we finally reached a narrow storefront with a creaking sign swaying in the breeze that read "Orcsbane Inn." I didn't believe it was possible, but somehow this place was even dirtier than the tavern I'd been in. The stairs sagged underneath our combined weight as we ascended up to her room, and the rusty hinges squealed when she opened the door. But the lock clicked into place behind us with no problems.

We sat down across from each other, neither sure where to start.

"Where are you from?" She asked eventually. "Where there are no dragons?"

I sighed. "Place called New York. But I couldn't really tell you how to get there, or how I got *here* for that matter. I don't think I'm even in the same universe anymore."

She gasped. "*A shade traveler!*" She leaned in close to study every single bristly hair on my chin; it had been a few days since I had a proper shave. "I've heard of men who can travel between worlds, but I never believed it was true!" One of her hands reached up, hovering over my skin like she wanted to make sure I was real and not some kind of apparition. She had apparently forgotten the fact that she dragged me through the

streets just a moment ago. "But you're so young! They say it takes the mystics a century to learn the trick! How ever did you do it?"

"Beats me, hon," I told the girl with a shrug.

She continued to stare at me with that same dumbfounded expression, and it was making me uneasy. I was more used to glares and disgust from strangers. "So do you know anything about dragons or not?" I changed the subject.

She finally snapped out of her daze, moved over to the wardrobe in the corner, and threw it open. Instead of clothes, it was full of books and scrolls and another instruments that I didn't even recognize. And taped to the back of one of the doors was a charcoal drawing of a flying lizard spraying a gout of flame at a castle tower.

"Absolutely," she said. "What do you want to know?"

I pored over the information that the girl (who had since introduced herself as 'Mona') provided about dragons. Nesting in near-unreachable mountain lairs, impenetrable scales, fangs and talons up the whazoo, fire breathing... this was going to be a bit more difficult than I thought. I hadn't quite realized what I was getting myself into when I agreed to this, but then again I'd always had a soft spot for the cases that were more likely to conclude with my corpse thrown in a back-alley dumpster than have a happy ending.

"All right," I said, speaking out loud to piece everything together. "So I think I get the general gist of it. Dragons are into gold and dames." Not too different from a number of other thugs I'd gone after. "But what *doesn't* make sense here is why *this* girl."

Referring of course to Mr. Aletho's daughter, Saria. "She's just a country bumpkin, right?" He'd told me that he was just a farmer and didn't have two coins to rub together. Hence coming to me, instead of one of the many mercenary groups around.

"But these dragons, they always go after *princesses*." I pointed to the image in the book, which showed burning castle spires and girls with tiaras clutched in the dragon's talons. "So if the family has got no money, and no royal blood... where's the motive?" All crimes have the same few elements. I didn't have to be familiar with dragons to know when something smelled fishy.

"Huh," Mona replied. She took the book from me and flipped through other documented cases of dragon kidnappings. "I hadn't thought of that."

I looked back down at the book. *God, I could use a damn cigarette*, I thought; it had been that kind of night. The pack was practically burning a hole in my pocket, but I was already down to my last five and I needed to ration them. That thought didn't make it any easier to resist the cravings. "Well, we'll just add that to the heap of other questions here. I think the next step is to go back and have another talk with Mr. Aletho, and then visit the scene of the crime. It may not lead us to the dragon directly, but I don't think we have any other leads to follow."

Mona nodded in agreement and closed the book. "That'll have to wait till morning. You can stay here for the night," she said. My eyes slid over to the narrow bed, certainly not large enough for us to share. At least, not without getting pretty cozy. It wouldn't be the first time that a woman had been so forward with me, but not without some sort of ulterior motive. A sly smirk must have spread across my face, because she threw a pillow at me. "On the *floor*," she followed up, chucking a folded blanket at me next. "You're the boss," I told her, still smirking. She rolled her eyes and blew out the candles around the room.

"One thing still doesn't make sense," I pondered aloud to the darkness.

"What?" she asked from the bed.

"You." Silence filled the room as I waited for some reaction from her.

"What about me?"

"Why are *you* after the dragon?" I asked her. "The way I see it, you got no skin in this game."

"Skin?" she asked, changing the subject.

"It's just an expression." I guess idioms didn't translate very well across universes. "But my point is that you've got no reason to be involved in this, and certainly no reason to risk your neck going after one of these things. So what's the deal?"

Mona was quiet again. "I'm just here for the gold," she finally said. "One dragon hoard and I'll be set for life. It's that simple."

"Uh huh." I closed my eyes and tried to settle into the bristly straw pillow. In my experience, things are *never* that simple. But I guessed that I would find out the real story soon enough.

“Another tavern?” Mr. Aletho asked, doing his best to hide his dismay as the cart pulled up to a classy-looking establishment called ‘The Witch’s Teat.’ The sign hanging out front was as lewd and poorly-drawn as you might expect, and that only made me love the place even more. “We haven’t had luck at any of the others, Mr. Duke. Perhaps we might try another tactic?”

“Who’s the detective here?” I asked. I’d taught him the word ‘detective’ on the trip, as well as some other useful words; there really wasn’t much else for me to do. I’d never quite realized just how damn *slow* a horse-drawn (or oxen-drawn, or whatever those things were) carriage actually *went* until I had to spend all day in one.

“You are,” he conceded.

“That’s right. *I* am. And if there’s one thing I know, it’s that a *bar* is always the best place to get information.” I gestured toward the drawing of the witch baring her breasts on the sign. “And the scummier the bar, the more the occupants will know. That’s just how the world works. Got me?”

“I’m with Mr. Aletho,” Mona said, climbing down from the driver’s seat and looking with disgust at the grimy-to-the-point-of-opaque windows of The Witch’s Teat. “We’ve stopped at every dump between here and Birchmere with absolutely nothing to show for it.”

“Come on.” I opened the door, revealing a darkened and grimy interior. “It’ll be fun! Worst case, we have a nice drink with some lovely fellows, eh?” Inside, a single man wearing a leather eyepatch grimaced at us from his barstool. He used a hand to shield his one remaining eye from the bright sunlight, and then turned to the side so that the misshapen hump on his back could be used for shade.

“Sure,” Mona pinched her nose to avoid the smell wafting out of the bar, making her voice nasal. “Just like all the others, right?” She slapped a hand on my shoulder, still smarting and bruised from the fight I’d had with an ogre a few days back. “Fun.” Then she stepped inside.

The bartender continued rubbing a dirty glass with a dirty rag, hardly even noticing as we entered. Mona, Mr. Aletho, and I stood at the bar for close to a minute before he

even acknowledged our presence with a grunt and a glare. “What can I get you?” he finally said.

“A double helping of your strongest booze,” I said with a thump on the bar. Over the course of our journey, I’d resorted to that old tried-and-true cure for hangovers known as ‘the hair of the dog.’

The bartender gave me the stinkeye, but then pulled an unlabeled brown bottle from under the counter and sloshed the contents into a glass. Instead of the dull brown of whiskey that I’m used to, it was bright green. He slid the glass across the wooden bar, which wasn’t smooth enough for it to make it down to me without spilling some. “And you?” he asked Mona and Mr. Aletho.

Mona took one look at the filthy glass in his hand and just laughed. “Nothing for me, thanks.” The bar fights and lack of normal hygiene that drew me to dives like this seemed to not have the same appeal for Mona.

“How about some information?” I asked the bartender. “You know anything about *dragons*?”

The hunchback on the stool next to me choked on his... well, whatever black syrupy-textured liquid he was drinking. A bunch of it dribbled down onto his chin and onto the bar, which he quickly wiped up with his sleeve. “Sorry,” he grunted, sounding like he had to speak through a mouth full of marbles. “I just...” he snuck a look over at the three of us. “Never mind. Sorry.” He went back to his drink, but with his head cocked a bit to the side so that he could keep his one good eye on us.

“Ain’t no dragons in these parts,” the bartender said. “Not in all the years I’ve owned this place anyhow.” He stared down at the glass in his hands as he spoke, never once looking any of us in the eye. He just kept rubbing the same spot on the rim of the cup as though focusing on the same spot would somehow counter the fact that the rag itself was filthy.

“Uh huh.” The man was practically dripping sweat like a god-damn cartoon character. “And you know any towns around here where they might have been seen a little more recently?”

“Nope.” Still wouldn’t look at me. “That all?”

Mr. Aletho threw his hands in the air. “Well, we ought to get back on the road, then, Mr. Duke. I think we could make it to Dewhaven by nightfall. Depending on the roads, that is.”

“If you leave now, sure,” the bartender added. “You could get there by dusk.”

“There might even be a half-decent place to stay there,” Mona said. She and Mr. Aletho looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to give in. I rolled my eyes and took another sip. “All right,” I finally told them. “You guys go get the wagon ready.” I held up my cup still half-full of green booze. “I’d rather savor this though, if you don’t mind. Whatever it is, it ain’t half bad.”

Mona smirked, but didn’t say anything. She probably thought that ‘savoring’ this one drink meant that I’d be having a few refills. Not that I could blame her; it certainly wouldn’t be out of character. She and Mr. Aletho headed back out the door, and I could see why the other guy at the bar had been so blinded (well, more so than usual) when we first entered. The dust-caked windows barely let in any light, and by now my eyes and adjusted.

The door clattered shut behind them. I looked at the bartender, still rubbing that same glass. Then I looked at the Hunchback McEyepatch down the bar, still drinking his glass of thick tar and trying to pretend like he wasn’t still watching me out of the corner of his remaining eye.

I downed the rest of my drink and smacked my lips in satisfaction. Then I smashed the glass against the wooden bar, sending shards of glass flying. I held up what was left of it: just the bottom of the glass with a few wicked-looking shards sticking up. “So,” I told my captive audience, both of whom were now giving me their full attention. “Which one of you am I going to have to kill to get the truth about the dragons?”

“We don’t know nothing!” The bartender shouted, dropping the still-dirty glass and the rag onto the counter so that he could hold his hands up.

I sighed. “Honestly, is there *no one* in this world who knows how to lie? It takes all the fun out of it.”

“Good news!” I announced, banging the door to The Witch’s Teat closed behind me.

“Turns out that the bartender did know where we might look for a dragon after all!” In the sunlight, I spotted a little bit of blood left on my knuckles and wiped it off on my trousers before Mona or Mr. Aletho noticed.

Mona dropped the handful of hay that she was feeding to our big hairy beasts of burden. “Really?”

“Yeah!” Nothing puts me in a good mood quite like a stiff drink and a rousing bar fight.

All I needed now was a good smoke to make it perfect. Unfortunately, I was down to my very last cigarette. Had to save that for something special. “Turns out the dragon flies over these parts pretty often. It has been seen going up into a cave in the mountains over there.” I gestured beyond the tavern to the snowy peaks in the background, only a day or two’s ride away.

“That’s great!” Mr. Aletho said. “Our first clue; it’s so exciting! How were you able to get them to remember?”

From the bar behind me, there was a low moan of pain. “I’m just persuasive, I guess.” I slapped the rump of the big hairy ox thing, causing it to snort at me. “Come on, let’s get going.”

An enormous shadow passed over the cart. The hairy oxen noticed immediately and tried to bolt in different directions, snorting like mad and straining at the cart’s harness. I glanced upward quickly enough to see a set of leathery wings and a long spiked tail disappearing behind the nearby mountainside.

“Dragon!” all three of us shouted at the same time. It was our first sighting of the beast since we’d gotten into these mountains a few days ago. But we’d heard about a number of sightings, and the reports only grew more frequent as we got further and further away from the main road. A farmer a few days back told us that he’d seen the thing nearly twice a week for the past year or so. It had to live somewhere around here.

“Can’t you get these things moving any faster?” I said to Mona as she tried to wrangle the oxen back into position. She turned, still gripping one of its curved horns in her hands, and shot daggers of rage at me. Mr. Aletho, on the other hand, did not seem at all thrilled at all about pursuing the dragon. Poor guy smelled like he’d pissed himself, though maybe that was just a side effect of traveling on this damned cart for the past two weeks without a good shower or shave to be found. Either way, he was scared out of his mind.

Soon enough Mona got us moving again and we rattled our way around the dirt road that up the mountain. We didn’t have to travel far before turning a corner and getting a good view up the valley. Right smack dab in the middle of the cliff face was a yawning black opening: the only place large for a dragon to hide around these parts. “The jig’s up, pal,” I muttered to the dragon under my breath.

“Jig?” Mr. Aletho asked, overhearing me. “Is there dancing?” His voice quavered with hope that maybe confronting the dragon wouldn’t be as bad as he’d thought.

“Wait here,” I told him; no time to explain idioms to him anymore. Mona was already unloading some of our gear from the cart. The road could only take us so far; the rest had to be done on foot. “We’ll be back with your daughter in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” Well, either that or Mona and I would probably be burnt to a crisp. But I’d never worked a case without some risk of a painful death, so this was nothing new. At least it would be a little more exciting than the boring old gun-to-the-back-of-the-head type danger. Mona held up a sword wrapped in a leather scabbard. “You know how to use one of these?”

I drew the weapon out and swished it through the air. “Ain’t a trusty nine millimeter, but I guess it’ll have to do for now.” I’d never had any actual training with a sword, but I’ve been attacked with enough blunt objects to know enough to defend myself. How hard could it be?

“Let’s get going, then,” Mona said. She picked up one of the packs, leaving the other by the side of the cart for me. We headed into the dense trees; I turned to see Mr. Aletho give us one last wave goodbye from his hiding spot inside the cart.

Night had already fallen by the time we reached the mouth of the cave. Turns out that smoking two packs a day doesn't exactly do wonders for your lungs, which made hiking up a nearly vertical cliff pretty difficult. I sat on a ledge outside of the cave, trying to catch my breath and looking out over the valley. The road was just a thin sliver of brown cutting through the dense green of the forest, but I could tell where the cart was from the tiny trickle of smoke rising from Mr. Aletho's campground.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Mona said from behind me.

I nodded and took a sip from my flask; the burning tingle down my throat helped soothe the burning in my lungs. "Not bad," I answered her. "Could use some skyscrapers, but beggars can't be choosers, right?"

"What are 'skyscrapers'?" she asked.

I chuckled and took another drink. "You all will find out in a few hundred years or so, dollface. Just gotta wait for that Industrial Revolution." My answer only confused her more, but I was in no mood to explain. I stood up and dusted myself off, not that it made any difference with my already-filthy suit. "You ready to do this?"

Mona nodded. We picked up our weapons and headed into the cave entrance. The entrance, larger than the Lincoln Tunnel, wound its way deeper into the mountain. Once it became too dark to see, we lit up torches that Mona had brought. Overhead, a field of beady little eyes watched from hundreds of bats. Or at least, I *think* they were bats. Who knows in this crazy world?

The walls of the tunnel opened up into the main chamber. There were torches attached to sconces all around the room, lighting it up enough that we didn't need our own. And what helped light the room was the mountain of gold and jewels in the very center, glittering and gleaming in the flickering firelight. With this amount of gold, I could buy up every building in New York City and still have enough left for a lifetime of booze, cigarettes, and dames. Why the hell did the dragon need to kidnap girls with a hoard like this? And now that I saw its treasure, I wondered whether I really cared about investigating the girl's disappearance after all. Maybe I was willing to let bygones be bygones in exchange for a boatload of gold.

"I don't see the dragon," Mona whispered, eyes roving around the room like it would be stuck to the walls or something. "Nor do I see any sign of Saria." Her tone indicated that she'd expected to find a corpse instead of the girl herself. "You think it went through that? Maybe took Saria too?"

"Through what?" I asked, not really following her gaze. I still couldn't take my eyes off of the pile of treasure in front of me. For *once* I'd finally gotten some payment from a deadbeat client! Not directly, of course, but leading me to a pile of gold is good enough for a guy of my standing.

"*That!*" she repeated, like I was an idiot for not understanding what she meant. And as soon as I saw it, I realized why.

The back half of the cave was not solid stone as it seemed. I'd been so distracted by the pile of treasure in front of me that I didn't notice. It was a kind of translucent greenish-grey color, and the surface rippled slowly from the center outwards like when you throw a rock into a pond. Looking through it, I could see... well, I couldn't quite tell what I was seeing. But it was definitely *something*. Some kind of square shape, next to two round smaller shapes, and some wavy black lines.

"What is it?" I asked Mona.

We moved closer to the back wall. The mountain of treasure filled most of the room so we had to skirt along the edges of it, kicking our way through a carpet of gold coins. They had all sorts of strange writing and portraits, probably coming from dozens of different countries. Along the way, I stopped to pick up a beautiful golden statuette of a buxom woman from out of the pile. It had some kind of jet-black gemstone for eyes, but the rest was solid gold. It was only about a foot or so tall, but the thing weighed a ton.

Not a bad payment for this job, I decided.

Mona touched the... whatever it was. It stuck to her finger like honey; when she tried to pull her hand back, it seemed to want to suck her in. She studied it closely for a moment, and then thrust her whole arm in. "I think it's some kind of portal," she said. "I felt rain drops on my hand." She showed me her palm, which was indeed wet now.

“You think the dragon went through?” I asked. We both turned to stare up at the portal, as if gazing into it might somehow reveal the answer.

Mona smiled. “Only one way to find out...”

I took a deep breath. “Guess you’re right.” I exhaled, then glanced over at her. She was still trying to see through the portal. “Just one last thing before we go through...”

I raised the statue high and smacked her on the back of the head with it. It made a satisfying *clunk* sound that skulls normally do when hit with heavy objects. Thankfully it wasn’t *my* skull for a change. Mona dropped like a sack of potatoes, falling right into the pile of coins. I had her trussed up like a turkey before she could regain her senses.

“Now,” I told her as she began to regain consciousness. “How about you explain who you *really* are and why you’re after Mr. Aletho’s daughter, huh?”

Mona stirred, then her eyes fluttered open. It took her a second to realize where she was and remember what had happened. Then she tried to stand, which sent coins cascading down the side of the pile with a merry jingle. It didn’t do her much good, though: if there’s one thing I can do well, it’s tie a dame up. Either for business or for pleasure.

“What are you doing?” she asked. Her tone was level, trying to sound annoyed at this delay. But I’d been through enough interrogations to sense the panic underneath. Mona was the type who always needs to be in control, and events had just taken a turn that she didn’t anticipate. “We need to go after the dragon!”

“We’ll get to that,” I told her, pacing back and forth. I couldn’t help but glance at the shimmering portal across the far wall. Mona had been right; it really did go somewhere. Or, at least, the coins that I’d thrown through it while waiting for her to regain consciousness had gone somewhere. “Just as soon as you explain your real deal.”

“I told you,” Mona growled as she struggled upright, pulling at her bonds. “I told you, I’m here for...” She paused as she recalled the lie she’d told me all those weeks ago. I tell you, this dame was better than anyone over in Hollywood. I saw the realization hit her

for just a flash, and then the façade was back up. “I’m just here for the gold.” She brushed one bound hand over the coins, causing more of them to fall. “But I know that I’m not getting paid until we’ve got the girl back. So let’s get going!”

“Sure, honey. You’ve got a pretty good act going, and you almost had me suckered in too.” I kept pacing in front of her. “But there was always something off about it, see? Some treasure hunter just happens to be hanging around some poor farmer sap and overhears talk about dragons? And just happens to volunteer to track the thing all through the countryside? Now that just sounds too good to be true. I mean, there are far easier ways to make money. Faster, too. I’ve been known to pull a good grift or two in my day, you know? And the thing about it is... you didn’t even *look* at all this gold here.” I pointed to the pile like she might not know what I was talking about. “Weeks on the road together, all supposedly searching after this dragon’s hoard... and it’s like you don’t even see it. This is enough to buy anything you could ever want!”

Mona glared. She’d gotten cocky, and she knew it. Thought I was just another dumb mark who’d fall for her good looks and innocent act. And now the jig was up and she had no reason to act anymore. “Some things can’t be bought with gold,” she said. Even her voice was no longer the same; it had a dusky tone now, and maybe an octave lower. “There we go.” I sat down in front of her. Her eyes were pure fire. “Now we can have a real conversation like real adults. No more games.” I picked up one of the coins and looked at the bearded, crowned man stamped on the front. Probably worth a hundred dollars back in New York, and it was just one of a million in this pile. “So tell me, Mona.” I rolled the coin across my knuckles absentmindedly, like I used to do with quarters back home. “Why are you *really* here?”

She didn’t respond, and we just stared at each other for a bit. I could see the gears turning in her head as she tried to come up with a plausible lie. She may be a quick thinker, but not *that* quick. I stood up. “How about I take a guess, then? Way I see it, there aren’t many people who would take much of an interest in this case. These dragons seem to be pretty damn dangerous, and this job carries a pretty significant risk of ending up as lunch. The people who are interested would be anyone with an interest

in *the girl*. That would be Mr. Aletho... and her real parents. She's... what, a princess?" I shook my head; felt like I was narrating a damn fairy tale.

Mona's glare was all the reassurance I needed that I was on the right track. "So you're either part of the royal family yourself, concerned about a family member. Or, given the looks of this mug," I held up one of the coins with the king's portrait stamped on it, "you're more likely someone they hired to bring the girl back. You don't exactly have a royal bearing, no offense." Mona was far too talented and crafty to have been born to a life of luxury. She was a scrapper, and had clawed her way up from the very bottom.

"But the part I don't get," I said, "is what keeps you going now. I mean, even if you weren't really looking for the hoard here, you have it now. I really doubt the king is going to pay you even a fraction of all this!" We both looked at the gold for a moment, trying to wrap our heads around just how much this really was. More money than the damn Rockefellers! "So why not just take it and run?"

She sighed, looking around the dragon's cave before her eyes finally settled on me. "Like I said: there are some things that gold can't buy." She pushed her legs out and gestured to the ropes, asking me to untie them. I did, and she stood up so that we could talk face to face. "They have my brother, all right? He's in prison. They said that he was working with the rebels in the Dawn Mountains, but I know that he wasn't. He was only in tha..."

I held up a hand to cut her off. "So that's the rub? You bring back the girl, and they let him go?"

She nodded.

"Turn around."

She spun, and I cut the ropes binding her arms. The frayed bits fell to the ground, looking pretty out of place against a pile of gold coins and glittering jewels.

"That's it?" she asked, skeptical

I shrugged. "That's it. We got a job to do, and I just needed to know whether your heart's really in it. When someone's only in it for the money... well, let's just say that the bad guys can always offer even more. And that leads to some sticky situations."

Mona rubbed her wrists, seemingly still surprised that I'd let her go just like that. "All right, then," she said. She'd decided to stay with the deeper more sultry voice. I had to admit, it was pretty sexy. Now was not the time for that, though. She nodded toward the portal. "Let's get to it then."

We both turned toward the portal. I squinted, trying to make out just what that squarish shape was. It seemed so familiar, and I rubbed my eyes as if that would make the image clearer. Guess I would find out soon enough. "You ready?" I asked Mona.

She bit her lip and didn't respond. Then she stuck out her hand, palm open, and looked at me. She was waiting for me to hold her hand. I studied her for a moment, trying to decide if this was some new act she was starting. The vulnerable damsel in distress? But finally I decided it seemed genuine: she really was scared.

I took her hand, then led her forward. Together we stepped into the liquid of the portal and felt it envelope our bodies. It was warm, like slipping into a freshly-drawn bath. Or downing a flask of whiskey on a park bench in the middle of winter; that was a sensation I was much too familiar with.

And then we were out, and I finally recognized the shape that I'd been trying to see through the barrier. It was a dumpster. Your average, run-of-the-mill green rectangular metal dumpster full of black plastic trash bags. Sitting in your average run-of-the-mill alley, surrounded by run-of-the-mill red brick that was stained and dirt and graffitied. The only thing out of place were five or six gold coins on the ground; coins from the dragon's hoard that I had thrown through the portal. From the end of the alley, I could hear the sounds of car engines and honking horns, and the general patter of pedestrians walking and talking. Sounds that I was all too familiar with: the sounds of home.

"Wow..." Mona gasped. I turned to see her craning her neck, staring up at something above us.

I followed her gaze and an involuntary smile crossed my face even as rain sprinkled my face. "Well, I'll be damned," I whispered as I recognized the glittering lights of the Empire State Building. We were back in New York.

I walked out of the alley with Mona close in tow. My fingers brushed against the rough brick, just making sure that it was real. A rush of pedestrians streamed by on the sidewalk, not at all caring who we were or where we were going or why we were dressed like actors from Medieval Times. Well, a few of them might have shot us an odd look or two, but we didn't even qualify as 'weird' by New York standards.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Car exhaust, steam billowing up from the sidewalk grates, trash rotting in the streets, the scent of a dozen different cuisines from greasy dive restaurants all along this block... all swirled in a mixture of fresh rain. I was finally home. I turned back to Mona and, with a giant shit-eating grin on my face, reached into my pocket to pull out my last cigarette and the ragged book of matches that I'd been carrying for nearly two months now. "I've been waiting a long time for this one," I told her after blowing a perfect smoke ring.

She didn't really listen to me; she was too busy staring at the sea of lights from a million different windows. The street was a canyon of skyscrapers lined with neon signs and illuminated billboards advertising all of the old products that I knew so well. "This place..." she whispered, barely audible over the city din even though she was standing right by my side. "I've never seen anywhere like this..."

I took another puff. "New York City, baby. There *is* no other place like it."

Finally she managed to take in the crowds all around her. "So many *people*! There have to be..." she stood on her toes and tried to look over the swarm of hats and umbrellas in front of us. "At least a hundred thousand people here!"

"Try a few *million*," I answered. "This is the *center* of the *universe*. There are people here from every country in the world." And apparently a few from other worlds, too. "But dragons... well, that will be a first." I'd been so caught up in being home that I temporarily forgot why we'd come back here in the first place. Mr. Aletho's daughter was still missing, and somehow the dragon had come *here*. I looked up in the sky, perhaps expecting to see the silhouette of wings against the dull yellowish haze of the clouds. But of course there was nothing there; pretty sure there'd be a panic in the streets if dragons were flying overhead. So where could it have gone? We took another step out

toward the curb, and I took a good look at all the nearby buildings just to get my bearings.

A subway car passed by underneath us, causing the metal grate to shake violently. “By the stars!” Mona yelped like a snake had bit her on the ass. “What is it? An attack?” Her hand flew to the knife sheath at her side. I managed to stop her before she pulled the blade out; one of the few things that will get a New Yorker’s attention is a naked weapon.

I laughed and restrained her hand. “It’s not an attack, honey. Just the train passing by.” “The what?” Her eyes were still darting back and forth in search of danger. She glared at each oncoming taxi like it was a charging bull.

“Just the subway.” I pointed down, though she had no clue what I was gesturing at.

“Don’t worry about it. Trust me. I’ll show you later; you’ll love it.” After we found this dragon bastard, I’d show her all the sights. “So I’m thinking that it must be up on a roof somewhere. Like one of those big penthouse balconies for some rich fellow. That dragon’s got a lot of gold, right? Maybe he could afford a view of the Park too.” I looked up, trying to see which nearby buildings had the room for such a hiding spot. It couldn’t be far; someone would have spotted it flying over the city. “I’m thinking we need to get up high ourselves and see if we can spot it.”

“Yeah.” She looked up at nearby skyscraper at least fifty stories tall; the very biggest castles in her world maxed out around five or six stories. “Sure, that sounds fine.”

“Right.” I looked around. It sounded like a good plan, but most places in New York don’t exactly welcome strange visitors up onto their roofs. “Come on, let’s take a look around.”

We waded into the crowd and were swept up like a strong river current. I had no trouble navigating between everyone, but Mona took a few shoulders before I managed to grab her by the hand and part the crowd for her. I couldn’t help but laugh as she repeatedly tried to apologize to other pedestrians, and her utter confusion when they looked at her like she was... well, from another world. If only they’d known. She also got a quick tutorial in what crosswalk lights are, and why they should just be ignored.

I came to a sudden stop at the corner and Mona pulled up behind me. “What is it? Is the subway back again?”

I didn’t respond. There, across the street, was a bar. Not a bar that I knew, though. Which is odd, considering the fact that I’d pretty much made it my business to know every watering hole in the city. Particularly one so run-down and dirty: such dives were my specialty. Out front, there were at least six bouncers wearing dark pinstriped suits and matching hats. *That’s a lot of bouncers for a crappy dive bar*, I thought. *Hell, one bouncer would be too many.*

I stared at that place through traffic for what seemed like an hour. “Mona? Do you remember that night we first met? Back in that tavern where you were spying on me?”

“I guess?” she asked. “Why? What is it?”

“I spoke to a man there. A wizard, I think. I asked him where I could find dragons. You know what he said to me?”

She shook her head, leaning on a fire hydrant for a little support. “No... I don’t get it. What’s that got to do with this place?”

“He told me that I’d find dragons ‘where the sun hides from the moon.’ And where ‘Algathor’s breath burns the Acordia Tree!’”

“Ok... And that’s somewhere in this city?” she asked.

“Well I don’t know about Acordia trees but...” I pointed at the bar across the street. The blinking neon sign over the bar read **Eclipse** with a little sliver crescent moon logo. And there was just... something about it. Some detective’s sixth sense telling me that this place was unusual. Worth investigating. “Come on,” I told her. “Let’s go check it out.” We took one step into the gutter before I changed my mind. “Just a second,” I told Mona. “One last thing to do before we go.”

I turned and headed into the nearest drug store. A white-aproned clerk gave us a cheery greeting despite our appearance. I walked straight up to the counter. “Give me a pack of Lucky Strikes,” I told him.

With one last look to Mona to be sure she was with me, I headed into the rain and crossed the street toward The Eclipse nightclub. Almost immediately, I was nearly hit by a taxi. Brakes squealed, the horn blared, and the driver leaned out the window to wave his hands and shout at me in some language that I didn't recognize. I just grinned back at him. God damn did I miss New York! Even these damn taxi drivers.

We made it to the other sidewalk without further incident. This bar was not like most other places in New York. For one, it was set as far back from the street as possible, sandwiched between tall buildings like it was trying to hide. Most other bars and shops along 4th avenue were practically leaning out into the sidewalk to draw attention with flashing neon signs. And the other odd thing was that it seemed to be working: pedestrians walking by barely glanced at it, or the squad of trolls sitting outside. Their eyes just passed over from the liquor store on one side to the adult 'bookstore' on the other. I've seen a number of lonely, neglected watering holes in my time, but there was something unnatural about this one.

I wove my way through the crowded sidewalk and approached the group of bouncers with a friendly grin. "Evening, gentlemen." Now I actually regretted the fact that I was wearing some kind of medieval peasant costume instead of a proper suit and tie. Made me look like a damn putz.

The bouncers may as well have been blocks of stone. The guy in front of me, nearly seven or so feet of solid muscle and skin as dark as the night, didn't even look down. His pinstripe suit was soaked from standing out in the rain, but he didn't seem to notice how cold and wet it was. He just let rivers run down his cheeks and drip into the puddle at his feet.

"Errr... the lady and I are just looking to grab a quick drink," I told him, jerking my head back toward Mona behind me. "Maybe I'll meet me a nice dame tonight, you know? Got any lookers in there?"

Once again, no acknowledgement of me whatsoever. Only one of the bouncers, the one on the far end of the line, actually reacted: his lips curled up into a slight smirk even as his eyes remained looking straight forward. He must be the new guy.

“All right...” I turned to look at Mona really quick, and she just shrugged. Not like she knew what to do either; this was my hunch, after all. And really, it was just based on the word of some crazy drunken wizard to begin with. But there was just something *off* about this place. And these people. “Well, the lady and I aren’t in town very often. My good friend Algathor is going to be very disappointed if I’m not able to stop in for a drink with him.”

The bouncer of a bouncer stirred. He crossed his arms and slowly looked down with his eyes narrowed into a suspicious squint. “*You* know Algathor?” His voice was a deep rumbling landslide of skepticism that was crystal clear even over the background noise of the busy street and swarm of pedestrians.

“Oh sure,” I said with a casual hand wave. “Old pals, Al and I.” I tried to remember everything that the old man in the tavern had said. “We exchange Christmas cards every year, vacation together, the whole deal. In fact, I was hoping I might run into one of his sons while I was here. Glaurion? You know him too?”

The bouncer glared at me for a bit. Maybe sizing me up. “Hrmph,” he finally answered. “Wait here.” He turned heel and vanished through the door of The Eclipse. For the brief second that the door was open, I caught sight of plush leather chairs and dim lights shining through a haze of smoke. Then the door swung closed again. Like clockwork, the other bouncers immediately spread out to fill the empty spot in the line.

I lit up another cigarette while we waited. It had only been a few minutes since my last one, but I had a lot of lost time to make up for. I offered one to Mona, who didn’t seem to really know what to do with it. I lit it for her and told her to inhale, which immediately set her coughing. “Don’t worry,” I said with a laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”

The bouncer returned, now smiling. “Well,” he said as he shook his head. “Looks like it’s your lucky day, stranger. Algathor will see you now.” He swept a hand back toward the door, and the line of bouncers parted to let them through.

I traded a ‘you ready?’ look with Mona. She nodded, looking quite happy to get away from the busy, chaotic streets of New York. I knew better though: people in this city don’t get killed right here on the sidewalk. I’d been turning over rocks in this city for decades,

and it was always the same. People tended to get themselves killed in dark, quiet corners where no one even hears the gunshot. Places just like The Eclipse. “All right,” I told Mona. “Let’s go meet Algathor.”

Untitled Fantasy Murder Mystery

A while ago, I asked you all for feedback on a potential story that I had been thinking about, which would be a Sherlock-holmes style story in a high fantasy setting. I was having difficulty coming up with good ideas for what clues I would use to identify the murderer, and you all gave me some great suggestions. So I've started writing and wanted to give you all a taste of the first chapter. Our protagonist, Salee, is a Seer from the all-psychic Order of Altos. I tried to use this first chapter to establish (1) the confines of Salee's abilities, and (2) start introducing her character as an Orc and how she is considered an outcast because of it. So I hope you like it! I'd love to hear any feedback you might have!

Dapper's hooves kicked through the layer of ash and clattered against the hard-packed earth underneath. Each gust of wind sent clouds of the grey-and-black dust flying into the air and swirling between the trunks of trees. Or at least, what remained of the trunks. They were nothing more than shards of charcoal jutting into the sky now. The roots holding most of them in place had been sheltered from the fire, but had withered away in the now-dead soil. Even after a hundred years, plants refused to grow here. The horse nickered softly as Salee guided him around another trunk that had fallen across the 'road.' She wasn't even sure it could still be called a road, given that it didn't appear to have been maintained any time in the past century. Nor had she seen any other travelers in days; not since leaving the Murin Lakes district. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen a single living thing along this entire path: no squirrels darting through the trees, no buzzing insects, and no cheerful chirping of birds. Just cold, dead silence. "I know, boy," Salee reassured Dapper with a good hearty neck rub. "This place creeps me out too." She'd been around death her entire life but never realized how truly eerie complete lifelessness was. "But it's only a little bit further." The horse answered with a head shake and continued on its way down the road. Further ahead, the city walls rose over the last of the blackened treetops. Salee adjusted in the saddle, uncomfortable

after so many days of riding. She'd set out from Murin as soon as she got the vision and set a record pace ever since.

They trotted out of the forest, and each took a big deep breath of clean, soot-free air. The ground sloped gently but noticeably upwards before meeting a solid wall of tan stone. Salee took a deep breath, and it seemed like Dapper did too. Both were happy to get out of that ashy-laden forest path and out into the open. With the smell of smoke gone, Salee could smell the salty tang of the sea air from the cliffs on the other side of the city.

She rode up to the closed city gates, closed and foreboding. Either side was flanked by identical towering statues made of the same reddish stone, each one holding some sort of large disk in hand. The features of the men and the disks were marred by scratches and pits that no one had bothered to repair. But the jagged edges were now smooth and dull, hinting at the long passage of time since the wounds were made. "Hello?" she called to the top of the battlements. She'd expected someone to be standing by ready to open the gates, but there was no one in sight along the top of the wall.

It took a moment or two for a gleaming metal helmet to appear over the side and look down. The guard didn't say anything at first; just studied Salee for a while. "Do my old eyes fool me, or is that an Orc down there?"

Salee ground her teeth together. Of course. It's the same song and dance going into every city, each one refusing to admit an Orc until she explained who she was and why she was there. But this time she was in a hurry and did not have time for this. "Was it the green skin or the tusks that gave it away?" she asked, waving her hands at the pointed teeth jutting out from under her upper lip. "Maybe the tattoos?" She gestured to her arms and legs, permanently covered in black ink. The patterns that identified her former tribe covered her entire body, though most of it was covered by her robes.

"Get out of here, Orc," the guard shouted. "City don't need any more thieves! Got enough human ones as it is."

"I am not a thief," she spat back. Not that her reassurances would help at all; it never did. Orcs didn't have a great reputation in most of the human cities. And, if Salee was

being honest, it was for good reason. Her brethren eschewed farming and production, choosing to get by with hunting and foraging. Or looting and killing, whenever that was easier. Salee too had taken part, in a past life. Before her seer abilities were discovered. "I am a member of the Order of Altos, and I need to speak with Magistrate Huras immediately."

"There's no Orcs in the Order of Altos," the guard responded. "They don't let your kind in, do they?" She took a deep breath, clenching and unclenching her muscles in an attempt to control the anger. Shouting at the guard wouldn't help; neither would hacking at the gate with her spear. Instead, she pulled at the chain from around her neck and brought out a heavy pendant from under her shirt. It was decorated with emerald gems arranged in the pattern of the Order's octagon. "You know this symbol?" she asked the guard. "It identifies members of the Order."

The guard leaned over the parapets and squinted. "I'm supposed to believe that? You probably just killed someone from the Order of Altos and stole it off 'im!" He shook his head. "I'm not stupid, Orc."

"Would you relay a message for me, then?" she asked, maintaining her patient and friendly outward appearance as best she could.

"And leave you here at the gate by yourself to climb over or somethin'?" he scoffed. "Not likely!"

Salée's temper spiked with every word that came out of the man's mouth. There's a good reason that Orcs have a reputation for violence, and it took every ounce of strength for Salee to fight back against her nature. She took another deep breath and squeezed the horn of the saddle until her knuckles turned white. "What if I could tell you your future?" she asked. "Would you believe me then?"

The guard's attitude changed; the skepticism fell away immediately. Salee grinned. No matter how far she traveled, she found that people were always fascinated by the abilities of a seer. And the chance to learn what's in stock for themselves? A mere guard would certainly jump at the chance for an honor reserved for kings and noblemen. And what did he really have to lose?

“All right then,” he answered. “If you can tell me about myself honestly, then I’ll go bring a message to someone in the city.”

Salee retrieved a large bamboo mat that was strapped to the side of the saddle and unrolled it on a flat bit of road in front of her. The mat, and nearly everything else she was traveling with, had acquired quite a bit of ash on the trip, so Salee blew on it and wiped the soot away with her hand. From her saddlebag, she brought out a collection of bones of varying sizes and from a number of different species as well as a bowl to hold them all. Every bone was also carved with a different rune. “I’ll need something of yours,” she shouted up to the guard. “A possession that you carry around with you.” He thought for a second, then snapped a bracelet off of his wrist and held it up. “Does this work?” he asked. “Sure,” Salee said. Jewelry works well for the ritual; the more often it is worn, the more that she can see with it.

He tossed the bracelet down to her, and she ran a finger over the etched piece of bronze. “Altos, lord of truth,” she invoked as she twisted the bracelet around in her fingers, “I ask you to reveal the secrets of this man to me.”

Then Salee shook the bowl with eyes closed, so as not to make any premature interpretations. Bits of bone rattled against the wood, and then she dumped the shards on top of the mat. When she opened her eyes, the shards scattered on top of the runes had fallen still.

“Well?” the guard asked. She smirked. The largest bone piece, part of a mule’s leg, lay squarely on top of the ‘ignorance’ rune. Salee clearly wasn’t dealing with the swiftest horse in the stable here. She touched the bone with one hand, then held the bracelet with the other. Her mind was filled with a vision of the guard but now twenty or so years younger. He stood at a forge beside a master blacksmith who was berating the guard for his shoddy work. The malformed sword in the guard’s hand was a pretty good indication why. “You trained to be a blacksmith when you were younger,” she told the guard. She left out the part about why that dream hadn’t worked out; people don’t like to be reminded of their failures.

Her hand moved to another piece of bone marked with the rune for occupation. It lay on top of the symbol for stagnation. She rubbed the bracelet again, but it didn't give her anything relevant this time. Just a vision of him pacing atop the wall alone. It could be from any time, and had no relevant information. That's sometimes the case with a seer's ability: just because you can see something doesn't mean it's what you want to see.

"You've been a guard for a long time now," she surmised.

"Anyone could see that," he answered.

She moved on to the bone marked with the rune for family, which lay atop the part of the map marked with contentedness. At least some good news for him, Salee thought. This time, the bracelet showed her a vision of the man's wife, mending nets in firelight with him sleeping by her side. "Your wife works for the fishermen, yes? Mending their nets?" she said to the guard. "You've had a long marriage, I can see." She searched for another bone marked 'children' and sought a vision from that as well. This one didn't give much information; just a blurry image of a man. "And I see that you have a son," she continued.

"You could have guessed all that," the guard said. Salee didn't need her Order training to hear that even the guard didn't believe that. He was shaken to hear details of his life read out by a complete stranger. Salee touched various bones, looking for something relevant. She saw visions of the guard drinking beer at a tavern, making jokes with coworkers... vague snippets of life that wouldn't do much to convince him of her seer abilities. Finally she touched the bone marked 'secrets,' showing the guard in a gaudy brothel decorated all in pink. He was enjoying a private show from a girl half his age who was certainly not the same woman in the humble home mending nets. The girl removed her top and pressed her breasts into the guard's face. "Well here's something interesting," Salee told him, looking up the wall with a smile. "I see you with a beautiful young woman at a cheery-looking place called Miss Louvard's?"

The guard gave a hacking cough as he choked on his own saliva. "I... ahem..."

"Looks like you visit her pretty frequently," Salee continued. "And only her. Must be your favorite, right?" The vision was over now, but she saw the reaction it was having on the

guard and decided to continue with a combination of guessing and extrapolating. "And what a beauty. Time with her must certainly not come cheap. I wonder how many nets one has to mend to afford..."

"All right!" the guard interrupted, waving his hands frantically like that would snap Salee out of the vision. "All right; I believe you. Please, you can stop now." He sounded like his wife was breathing down his neck as he spoke. "You said you had a message you wanted me to bring to someone?"

Salee considered pushing it a bit further and asking him to let her in right then and there, but she realized she didn't know her way around the city at all and would probably need some help regardless. "I need to speak with Magistrate Huras. And if he is..." she didn't want to say 'dead,' though she knew that he probably was already, "if he is indisposed, then it should be the head of the city guard."

"Right," the guard repeated. "Magistrate Huras or Commander Denik. You... umm... you just wait here." His face disappeared over the side of the wall, but reappeared a moment later and nodded toward the bamboo rune mat. "You... uh... you said you could tell me my future?" he asked.

Salee realized that she'd only narrated his current life. Her eyes roved over the bones, looking for one that might hold clues to what might come for this guard. And though she knew it was a bad idea, her hand reached for the bone marked 'death.'

The vision was intense. She saw the guard's face wearing the same chestplate and helmet as he wore now, standing against what looked like the same beige stone of the wall. But he was on fire. Flames fueled by nothing flickered out of the gaps in his armor joints and out of the neck. He was screaming and thumping on his armor like he could somehow put off the flames that way. Normally visions were just that: only sights. But here, she could feel the heat from the flames coming off of him. She watched as his skin simply boiled away and the screaming stopped.

She snapped out of the vision with a jolt, falling on her back away from the mat. The guard watched from the ramparts, awaiting an answer. "What did you see?" he shouted down.

Salee couldn't get the image of his burning flesh out of her mind. And as much as this man said he wanted to know his own future, years of experience has taught her otherwise. No one truly wants to know how things will end. "Many happy years," she told him. "So long as that wife of yours never meets Miss Louvard, I think." She faked a smile at her joke, and the guard forced a chuckle. "Now please," she reminded him of the task at hand, "this message is very urgent."

"Right," he said. "Back in a bit." His face disappeared over the side of the wall again. Salee carefully placed the bone shards back into the wooden case and back into the bag on Dapper's saddle. Then she rolled the mat back up and stowed it away too. The oracle mat and the bone shards were her most prized instruments, the product of weeks of careful work. As part of the Order of Altos's initiation process, each new seer creates their own unique tools and is expected to protect them accordingly.

True to his word, the guard returned swiftly leading two other men. All three of them peered over the wall, and the two newcomers seemed stunned to realize that the first guard was actually telling the truth. "Is one of your Commander Denik?" she asked, recalling the name that the guard had used for his superior. She knew that neither of them was Magistrate Huras: in her vision of his death, she'd seen that he was a much older man with pure white hair that reached his shoulders. These men were both stereotypical guards with stern jaws and closely-cropped dark hair.

"Denik is occupied at the moment," one shouted down to her. "But we're told you have a message for Magistrate Huras?"

"It's not a message!" she shouted back. This was all just wasting time! She should have just scaled the wall from the outset and made her way in on her own. "I am from the Order of Altos and I had a vision concerning the Magistrate. He's in grave danger."

The two newcomers exchanged a glance, then back down at Salee. "You'd best come with us, then," one said. "I am Denik's second-in-command, Lieutenant Commander Gilm." The gates began to grind open, shaking off a cloud of dust that showed just how long it had been since anyone had used them. "I will escort you to him."

Salee returned to Dapper and led the horse through the gateway with her. Gilm's words pretty much confirmed what she already knew: she had arrived too late. The Magistrate was dead.

Salee climbed back into Dapper's saddle and rode through the city gates. Lieutenant Commander Gilm stood over the threshold waiting for her. He gave a bow of greeting, looked her straight in the eyes and did his best not to flinch at the looming figure towering over him. Most humans don't realize quite how large Orcs are until they have the misfortune to meet one face to face. And those encounters don't usually end too well. To his credit, Lieutenant Commander Gilm did much better at hiding his fear than most other men, but the members of the Order of Altos are trained to read body language better than most can hide. She took no offense.

"Welcome to Bahing City," Gilm said with a sweeping gesture toward the buildings and the bay behind him. "I'll escort you to the Commander now, Ms... ummm..."

"It's Salee." No time for pleasantries. "On your horse, Mr. Gilm. We're in a hurry. I need to see with Magistrate Huras *as soon as possible*." Gilm's lips twitched, and he looked to the ground. He didn't want to tell Salee why they didn't need to hurry as she thought they should. More confirmation of what Salee already knew. "Even if he's already dead, I need to see the scene of the crime to ensure that nothing is disturbed."

Gilm, grateful that he didn't have to explain the true situation to Salee, nodded and climbed onto his own horse. "I'll lead you, then." He turned down the hill and spurred his horse forward. "OUT OF THE WAY!" he announced to the throng of pedestrians crowding the streets. "City Guard business, get out of the way!" Most of them shot him a begrudging look, but then moved to the edges of the street to clear a path. The road curved sharply to the right and headed downhill in a series of tight switchbacks. They galloped through the parted crowd and around the first curve, giving Salee her first full view of the city.

Bahing City was perfectly circular, tucked inside a large round bowl that dipped down into a calm bay full of white sails. All along the sides, she could see clear avenues running from the wall at the rim of the bowl all the way down toward the center, just like

the road that Gilm was leading her down now. Towers and buildings of stone and wood clung to every part of the bowl like moss on the side of the tree. The only break in the rounded cityscape was the harbor entrance, a narrow channel with steep cliffs on either side that guided ships out into the ocean beyond. On the southernmost side of the channel, there was a towering lighthouse lit even now during the day. The northern side of the crater was capped with a beautiful palace; even from this distance, Salee could see carefully-sculpted gardens and rows of exotic fruit trees on steep terraces.

The road grew less and less steep until finally it led to a broad avenue right next to the waterfront. Docks jutted out into the water every hundred feet to meet boats flying flags from hundreds of cities across the world. The street was wide enough for a dozen horses to ride side-by-side and circled the entire bay. This should have made their journey easier, but this avenue was so crowded with wagons and merchants and sailors that movement became nearly impossible. Gilm shouted at the top of his lungs, but it didn't have quite the effect he'd hoped. Some of the merchants couldn't understand him, or at least didn't care what he had to say.

Finally they managed to weave their way around the obstacles and arrived at the far end of the bay. The road terminated at a second gate, separate from the fortifications around the rim of the city. Most of the buildings crammed onto the sides of the crater were all built with the same pink stone as the city walls, with maybe some bits of brick or wood. They had all grown up haphazardly around the docks and the roads with no logic or planning in evidence. But the Palace itself looked like it had been transported whole from another world. It was built of pure white marble with soaring columns and sculpted balconies. Every inch of the grounds surrounding the Palace was covered in thick foliage, all perfectly manicured and lush despite the arid climate. In her travels, Salee had seen many extravagant displays of wealth. But this beat them all.

The guards atop the battlements scowled at her and hesitated even as Gilm ordered them to open the gates. Salee ground her teeth together, trying not to imagine a parade of people stomping through the crime scene and moving everything. Finally Gilm managed to shout the right combination of threats to get them to move and the doors

swung open. As they passed through and wound their way up to the castle, Salee glanced back to see the guards still glaring.

A platoon of guards met the two of them. "Commander Denik is expecting you," one of them announced as Salee and Gilm dismounted. Another approached to take Dapper's reins from Salee. "Take my horse to the stables and ensure that he eats well; we've been riding non-stop since Murin and there was no fresh grass or him to graze on along the way." She rubbed her hand through Dapper's long mane, then gave him a smack on the flank to get him moving. Poor thing had tried grazing through the ash for far too long in search of anything to eat. "Oh, wait!" Before they could lead the horse away, Salee retrieved her oracle mat and bones shards.

"Come." Gilm pointed up a flight of marble stairs leading into the tower. "Magistrate Huras's chambers are this way."

They reached the top of the steps and turned a corner, only to find someone waiting for them. A dwarf, barely half of Salee's height with a ruddy complexion and chestnut hair, gave a cheerful wave upon seeing Gilm. "Ah, my boy Gilm! Finally." His eyes passed over to Salee without even a hint of concern. It was a refreshing change of pace, she realized. Perhaps he too understood the idea of being an outcast in human society, though Dwarves didn't have the bad reputation that Orcs did. "I am Commander Denik of the Bahing City Guard. You must be the detective they sent!"

Salee nodded. It wasn't quite accurate; no one had given her an order to come here; she'd made the choice based solely on her vision of the Magistrate's death. But the Order had a general rule that any unbidden vision was always worth following. Such visions only happened for matters of great importance. But explaining how prophecy arrives was not something she had time for right now. "Yes, I am Salee. I take it that Magistrate Huras is already dead?"

Denik shot a look at Gilm, who gave a helpless shrug. Then he turned back to Salee. "I suppose there's no keeping secrets from a psychic like yourself," he said. Again, Salee didn't explain that that wasn't how things worked. She wasn't a mind reader. But she didn't correct him, either. It certainly wouldn't hurt to have him be one-hundred-percent

honest with her even if it was for a false reason. “Well, yes. But please keep that quiet. There will be panic in the city if they find out he’s been murdered. And the way he was murdered!”

“By fire?” Salee asked. She’d seen him burning in her vision.

Gilm and Denik both nodded. “That makes everyone around here nervous, for obvious reason.” Denik said. “Best to keep it under wraps until we know what we’re dealing with.”

“What reasons are those?” Salee asked.

Denik and Gilm exchanged a look. Then, together, they both blurted out: “because of the *Dragon Kings*!”

They’d expected her to have some reaction to that, but she didn’t. “I’m afraid I’m not from around here. Who are these Dragon Kings?”

They seemed surprised that she didn’t know. “You **saw** what the Dragon Kings did,” Gilm reminded her. “You came in through the Black Woods! The Dragon Kings are the ones that burned the whole forest. They could conjure fire from nothing, and control the flames like a pet at their beck and call.”

“I see.” Salee had seen a number of circus performers claiming to control fire, but each one had been a fraud, of course. The burned forest was a pretty significant piece of evidence, but such fires happen all the time. “And where are they now?”

“Dead,” Denik answered. “Or at least, supposed to be. After seeing this body, I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Well, I’d better see it too, then.” She nodded down the hallway for Denik to keep leading the way.

The stairs wound upwards until it came to a long, marble hallway. This was probably one of the only places in the city that didn’t look out onto the bay; they were far enough up the cliff now that they could see out to the other side, out on the open ocean. Nothing but calm grey water and blue skies in sight, marred only by one red sail of a ship arriving into port. It was easy to forget the bustling metropolis on the other side of the palace when all you could hear from here was the screeching of gulls.

They stopped at the only door on the right side of the hallway. The tower that it led to jutted out of the side, a blemish on the otherwise smooth face of the cliff. Denik retrieved the key from his pocket and reach up to the lock.

Salee took a step in and was instantly overpowered by burnt flesh. The body in the center of the room had been so badly charred that it was barely recognizable anymore. Only the splayed-out arms made the human form more clear. "Did anyone move the body?" she asked, taking a step closer to study it. Gilm tried to follow her inside, but was overwhelmed by the smell of it.

"No, Ma'am," Denik said. "This is just where we found him. Nothing in the room has been touched."

"Good." She took a good long look around the room. There was a large desk, impeccably organized and neat. Scrolls were carefully rolled up and stacked on a rack against the wall. There were some cushy chairs, an ornate rug, and across the back of the office, a full bookshelf. "No fireplace," Salee commented. After a second look, she realized something odd: "No candles, either." Nothing that would start a fire.

"It's a new thing," Denik told her. He pointed to a string of glass balls that hung from a wire over the desk. "The boys from the Metallurgy Institute call 'em 'light bulbs.'" He crossed the room and flicked a switch on the wall; they immediately began to glow bright as little suns. Salee reached towards it, making sure that it wasn't hot like a flame. "Interesting. Means someone came in here to start the fire. This was planned ahead of time." She took another look at the body in the center of the room. It was charred black, but nothing in the room seemed to even be singed. The books on the wall or the scrolls on the desk would go up in flames at the slightest spark. Even the carpet where the body had fallen was unburnt; covered in black soot from the body, but not singed itself. "And who found the body?"

"Servants came in to bring him his breakfast and found the door locked," Denik said. He took a seat at the desk and put his feet up on the polished wood surface. "Apparently that's never happened, so they went to check his bedroom and found that empty. Then

they went to the guards. And when they finally found the key to the door, this is how they found him.”

“Hmmm.” Salee moved to inspect the door. Sturdy iron bounds and a stout lock. “And who had the key?”

“Well the Magistrate here had one.” Denik held up the key that had been laying on top of the desk, “and the guards found the other one buried at the bottom of a drawer in the gatehouse. There were five or six guards in there all night, so no one could have gotten to it if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Right. So no way for someone to lock the door after leaving,” Salee concluded. She moved to the windows and looked out. The stone walls below were smooth, and led straight to the ocean probably a hundred meters down. There was a similar tower along the wall, but thirty-five or forty meters further down the wall. Getting out that way wasn’t a possibility either. “Any guards see anything suspicious? Anyone else around?”

Denik shook his head. “This section of the palace is for the Chief Magistrate alone. They patrol this hall every twenty minutes on the dot. My guards would never dare be late. I spoke with the officer, and no one was seen entering the Magistrate’s tower, nor exiting. No noises, either.”

She paced the room again, looking for anything significant or out of place. No way in, no way out, no way of starting a fire. And a queer fire as well: how could a man be burnt to death but the carpet beneath underneath him completely untouched? “Did he have any enemies?” she asked Denik as she searched. “Anyone with a motive to kill him?”

The dwarf guard shrugged in response, causing his armor to clang. “A man in his position makes many enemies.” Not exactly a straight answer. “Few merchants in the city look favorably on their tax collector.”

She returned to the desk and looked through the neatly-organized shelf of scrolls. Only one was out of place, resting in the center of the desk. Perhaps he didn’t have time to put it back into place before his death. Salee unrolled it and read the title: The Ancestry of the Bahingian Dragon Kings. She showed it to Denik. “Seems the Magistrate was doing some reading before his death.” She unrolled her mat and took a seat with the

scroll in front of her. Then she repeated the same ritual as she'd done back at the gate: a prayer to Altos, shaking the marked bone fragments, then casting them across the mat. From the doorway, Denik watched her work with interest. Not every day that a member of the Order of Altos is called in to solve a crime.

She tried handling the usual suspects first: Death, Murder, Darkness. None of those bones gave her a vision of anything of value. Those runes nearly always worked with items like murder weapons; she'd never had to try a scroll before. She searched the mat for something a bit more relevant and settled upon 'owner.'

She was immersed in the vision immediately. The same room, but Salee could see the setting sun out the window and the electric lights glowed brightly. And of course, there was no charred body on the floor; just a neat, clean rug. Magistrate Huras sat at his desk with this same scroll spread out in front of him. His eyes roved over it, searching for some piece of information. He also held a blank sheet of paper and was furiously scribbling notes. Across from him sat another man, tall and lean. They were speaking, but Salee couldn't hear any of it.

Then she was back in the room with Commander Denik and the body of Magistrate Huras. She blinked as her eyes re-adjusted to the sunlight. "Someone was here with him last night," she said. "Do you have logs of who came into the palace?"

Denik nodded and shouted out the door for Gilm to go retrieve them. She searched the room again for the notes that Huras had taken, but couldn't find those either. After a few sweeps of the room, her eyes finally fell on the corpse again. More specifically, on the clenched right fist. She took a deep breath and unfurled the charred fingers, revealing one last little scrap of singed parchment. Whatever he'd learned from the scroll was a secret he'd take to the grave.

"Here we are," Denik said as Gilm returned to the tower. They spread the book out on the desk and flipped it to the most recent page. "Latest visitor was a Thun Bougeran."

"I know him," Gilm chimed in. "Odd little man, runs a museum off of Silk Street."

"Let's go, then," Salee said, already halfway out the door.

The streets grew progressively narrower as Gilm led Salee and Denik away from the bay and back up toward the rim of the crater. Beggars reached out with dented tin cups as they left the main boulevard, but there were none down the tiny side street they entered. It got to the point where Salee could barely walk without brushing both shoulders against the old stone walls of buildings closing in on either side. "Just a bit further," Gilm reassured them both as he scanned the metal markings on the door. "Better be," Denik panted. Most of the way up hill had been by horseback, but they'd come on foot after leaving the main road. The Commander's short legs and oversized belly had not made the trip any easier for him. Even Salee, whose Orc physique far outmatched any human, was a bit winded after so many stairs. On her way into the city, she hadn't realized quite how steep the roads could be.

Glancing around, Salee recognized all of the tell-tale signs of a bad neighborhood. It seems that they're the same in every city across the continent. Crumbling bricks struggling to hold up buildings that were about ready to slide down the side of the crater. Graffiti of various crude depictions of genitals and other vulgarity. Residents who took one look at the gleaming armor of Gilm and Denik and decided that they had other places to get to at a very brisk pace. Salee kept a hand near the knife that she kept in her belt just in case.

"Ah!" Gilm stopped in front of a squat, unremarkable building that was half buried into the side of the crater. Across the top of the entryway was a gleaming metal sign written in flowery script: **Bahingian Historical Society**. "This is it." The door squeaked open, and he led us inside. "Gomor, are you here?" he shouted into the dark room.

A bell chimed out a cheer greeting as Salee stepped over the threshold. The interior was dark; even the windows were covered in maroon curtains that blocked out the light from the street. The few sunbeams that managed to filter through were choked with dancing particles of dust floating through the air. A deep breath revealed scents of stale wax and the slightly musty smell of old scrolls that reminded her of the Order's library back home in Altos. She'd never grown up with books when she was with the tribe, so she'd had to make up for lost time in there once she joined the Order.

The room was stuffed to the brim. Paintings were crammed so tightly onto walls that the frames touched. And nearly every single painting showed the same thing, in one form or another: fire. There were a number of other artifacts in glass display cases: everything from mundane objects like boots and cups to bejeweled swords and a ruby-studded crown. The most notable item, however, was that the entire back wall was lined with golden discs, some as small as Salee's fist while the largest was about as tall as she was. Each of them was carved with the same pattern, a scribbly, loopy script that spiraled inward from the edges.

"Oh!" a man came bustling out from the back of the museum and rushed forward to greet the visitors. Salee recognized him immediately as the man from the vision that she'd had in Magistrate Huras's office. He was tall with a messy mop of straw-colored hair and clear blue eyes. His skin was pale as cream despite the warm climate of the region and Salee guessed that he didn't leave this place very often. "Oh, hello! I'm afraid I wasn't expecting you. I don't have any tours scheduled for this afternoon, you see. And most people tend to..." His voice trailed off as he took a look at his visitors. Or, more specifically, at Salee. "Oh my!" He took an involuntary step backward and craned his neck upward to look her in the eyes. But she was pleasantly surprised by his reaction: no horror and desperate search for the closest exit. "An orc!" he practically squealed it with excitement, then he took a deep bow, so low that he could have kissed Salee's knees. "It is such a pleasure to meet you, my lady! I am Gomor, the proprietor of this..." he gestured around at the cramped, musty museum, "This palace of learning!" *Certainly has a high opinion of his work*, she mused. "Tell me," he continued jabbering. "What tribe are you from, Ma'am? No!" he took her by the hand and traced the tattoos running up her wrist. She had to fight the urge to jerk her hand back; people didn't touch her very often. "No, let me guess! From one of the Luvín Mountain Clans?"

Salee couldn't bear to crush the poor man's spirit by telling him he hadn't even guessed the right region. Her biological family were all swamp dwellers, spending their lives in the mud of the islands to the south. But he just looked so hopeful; so eager to prove that

his knowledge was finally coming in handy. "How did you know?" she asked, feigning shock.

"Orc tattoos are a personal interest of mine!" he responded, positively *beaming* with pride. "I've got quite the collection of interpretive guides! In fact I just received one that details how to recognize some of the Northern tribes!" He began heading toward his bookshelf, then turned back around. "On second thought, it contains some rather... pejorative comments on how they should be dealt with..."

"I'm afraid we don't really have time for that anyway," Salee said.

"Of course." It was as though he noticed Salee's two companions for the first time.

"Lieutenant Gilm, pleasure to see you again. And you..." he looked at the insignia on Denik's chest and his eyes widened with shock. "You must be Commander Denik! The honor is mine, sir!" He scurried forward and pumped Denik's hand vigorously. "So many illustrious visitors these days! To what do I owe the pleasure?" His smile dimmed a bit when he realized that neither of them was smiling back. Then he seemed to remember what Denik's job was. "... I'm not in some sort of trouble, am I?"

"That is what I am here to find out," Salee answered. "Tell us about your meeting with Magistrate Huras."

"Oh my." He fell into a nearby chair and placed one hand on his forehead. "Tell me... was he... *burned*?" The last word was just a whisper that managed to somehow sneak out.

Salee nodded. "And how would you know that?"

"He sent a messenger for me yesterday, asking that I come by and speak with him about the Bahingian Dragon Kings."

"Would he already know about them?" Gilm asked.

"Well, he wanted to know about their lineage. Starting from Samark of the Flame, first of the line, all the way down to Hemark. He wanted to know all of their sons and daughters, every offshoot branch and possible relatives."

"What for?" Salee asked.

Gomor shrugged. "He indicated that a member of the family had survived the Revolution hiding in plain sight. I brought him a scroll that included a family tree, and he had a number of questions for me." He looked down at his hands and fidgeted with his fingers. "He... the Magistrate... he seemed to suggest that one of them had somehow become a member of the City Council, but he wasn't sure. I left the scroll with him so that he could read over the genealogy and see if there was some connection to the families of the current Council members. He didn't indicate who he suspected, though."

"That would make sense," Gilm muttered to Denik. Upon seeing Salee's questioning look, he explained further. "All six members of the Council live in the palace now. And it's under guard night and day, so there are only a few people who could have been there so late at night. Maybe a few other staff members or servants could have had the opportunity, but Gomor here has provided a significant motive..."

Salee nodded. This had not been a random killing, and this was the best lead on a motive so far. If the 'Dragon King' wanted to keep his or her identity hidden, Magistrate Huras would have to be eliminated before he could speak. She turned back to Gomor: "And why was he so concerned that a member of the King's family had survived?"

"Silly me!" Gomor shook his head and smiled. "You're not from Bahing City; of course you're probably not too familiar with our history. The Doa family ruled this city for three hundred or so years. And we call them the '*Dragon Kings*' because they could *control fire*. Create flame from nothing, send it where they wanted... ah, hold on!" He jumped out of the chair and raced to the other side of the room. His enthusiasm was so infectious that Salee couldn't help but smile.

He pointed to an elaborate oil painting in a gilded frame squeezed in among all the others. The painting showed a man standing atop a cliff overlooking Bahing City; Salee recognized the palace on the cliffs and the circular bay behind him. But on the other side of the bay was a fleet of warships so vast that their sails obscured the horizon of the painting. Each one bore a blue flag with a golden horse galloping across it; Salee didn't recognize what country it was from. The most striking thing about the painting, however, was that about half of the enormous sailing ships were on fire.

“This is titled ‘The Repulsion of the Ammat Crusaders,’” Gomor announced. “It’s a Second-Age depiction of King Jumark single-handedly burning the fleets of Ammat. You see, the rulers of Ammat made the fatal flaw that many others did during the early years of the Dragon King’s rule: underestimating their pyromantic abilities.” Gomor pointed to the flames shooting straight out of the King’s hand and onto a nearby frigate. “King Jumark certainly convinced them otherwise! And trust me, this is a demonstrable fact. See here,” he raced across the room and held up a glass case with a charred blue flag with a bit of gold still visible. “The museum was quite lucky to acquire this piece, you know! One of the very few remaining relics of the battle!”

Salee looked at the painting, then back at Gomor. “You seem to admire these Dragon Kings.” She wasn’t quite ready to admit that men could control fire like that, but *he* certainly seemed to believe it with all his heart. Fanatics can be a dangerous element. “Oh, yes!” Gomor enthused. “Well, that is to say, I admire their *abilities*.” He glanced toward Gilm and Denik to confirm that even this limited statement was all right. “They were very powerful men and certainly shaped Bahing City into what it is today. Of course that doesn’t excuse all of the *dreadful* things that they did, particularly towards the end of their reign.”

“I see. Such as?”

He shook his head. “Of course. I’m sorry, Ma’am. Having grown up here, it’s easy to forget that some people may not know. The Dragon Kings grew... dangerous. They began to insist that they were not just men but *gods* come to Earth. They demanded worship instead of fealty. Some in the city resisted that idea with... ahem... *violent* means. Many innocent men and women were burnt alive in those days, either for good reason or for no reason at all. You may have seen that to the south of the city, there’s a forest...”

“A burnt forest,” Salee interrupted. “Yes. I came that way.”

“Ah, good! Then you know already. You see, King Hemark got the idea that an army of rebels was hiding out in the forest to ambush a party of mercenaries coming from Murin down south to reinforce his army. And the king was... well, he had a good amount of

liquor that evening according to the accounts of his waiters. So he went up onto the wall and set the entire forest alight. My own father used to say that the ash coming down in the streets was so thick that it was like a driving winter snow in the middle of summer. Of course, with the hindsight of history we know that there were no rebels in the forest, or at least not many. But the fire did destroy every farming village within fifty miles or so. By the bells, it nearly got to Murin too!

Salee nodded. She did recall Gilm and Denik describing the same story back at the palace. She had to admit that being surrounded by a room full of artifacts from these pyromancers made the story a lot more credible.

"Anyway," Gomor continued. "After he set the fire, he staggered back here to the palace. And the legend says that along the way, he saw protestors circling the statue of Jumark." Salee recalled the pedestal in front of the palace gates with the remainder of a man's legs set in stone. "His guards had to physically hold him back to prevent Hemark from burning all of those people too. But he made an announcement to the guards: if all of the rebels weren't rounded up by sunrise, then he'd torch the inside of the city too. Then, being drunk, he staggered off to bed. And... well... his servants killed him in the night. You see, most of the city's lower class are followers of the Beggar God, which..."

"Slit his throat right in his sleep," Gilm added, talking over Gomor's tangent. He had a grim scowl on his face, equal parts disgust and satisfaction. "Supposedly his bodyguards had 'stepped out for a smoke' all at once. He had it coming to him, after what all the people he killed. And would have kept killing, if someone hadn't taken care of him. 'Course, his children..." Both Gomor and Gilm fell silent.

"What happened to them?" Salee asked.

"They were... ahem... burned alive." Gomor tugged at the hem of his robe, embarrassed for what the denizens of the city had done all those years ago. "Seems the mob thought that would be a fitting end for the Dragon Kings. Just two boys, eight and eleven years." He nodded to another painting on the wall of two trussed-up young children being paraded through the streets of Bahing city by a torch-wielding mob.

"I see," Salee said. "So the world thought that the family had been eliminated."

Gilm and Denik nodded in unison. “*That* is why this murder comes as such a surprise. No one else has those powers over fire; it could *only* be one of the Dragon Kings.”

She turned back to Gomor. “And Magistrate Huras asked you about it.” The museum curator nodded. “Did you tell anyone else about the meeting? Even that it was taking place, or that the Magistrate had contacted you?”

“No, no one,” he answered. “I’ve got no one to tell.”

Salee looked toward Denik. “I wonder, then, who *e*/se the Magistrate might have told? It seems that he did not want to reveal much to Gomor here, which shows that he knew it should have been kept secret. Somehow, however, our murderer found out about his suspicions and decided to silence the would-be accuser before it became public.”

“A good question,” Denik concurred. “Perhaps we’d better ask the members of the Council?”

Salee didn’t answer immediately; she took some more time to look around the museum. She’d never heard of anyone who could control fire, but her Orc tribe had never given very detailed lessons on the history of human cities. She couldn’t exactly argue with the room full of evidence here proving that this family could indeed control fire as they claimed. “What exactly are we looking for, then?” Salee asked. “How do we identify our killer?”

Denik and Gilm shrugged.

“Gomor?” Salee asked. “Any thoughts? What would one of these Dragon Kings look like?”

“Ah!” His face lit up, and he jumped out of his seat. “Well, physically, the Kings were unremarkable. You see Domark here,” he pointed to a painting, “Had rather straight hair and a bulbous nose. While his son Lumark was quite different: curled hair and a thin, straight nose! And if it has been several generations since Hemark... well, I just can’t say with any certainty what this person might look like.”

Salee and Denik exchanged disappointed glances. The museum was silent for a while as they considered their options. Finally her eyes landed on the round discs lining the back of the room. “Gomor, what are those?”

He turned to see what she was pointing at, then his eyes lit up. “Those are the key to the Dragon’s power! They’re called ‘catalyst discs.’ To have power over the fire, one must keep both hands on the disc at all time. Each one is identical, inscribed with the same set of runes. I’ve been unable to find any translation for what it says; the Kings supposedly kept it a secret. There’s also an incantation that must be said when holding the disc. I know the incantation, if you’d care to hear it?”

Salee remembered the murmuring voice out the window in her vision. “No, thank you,” she said. She rose from her chair and grabbed hold of one of the discs. It was heavier than she’d expected.

“Oh, that’s a very delicate piece ...” Gomor tried to chide her but then gave up before he even finished his warning. “Just... be careful, please?”

“Why the different sizes?” she asked as she stared up at the largest one that was almost scraping the ceiling.

“It corresponds to the fire being started,” Gomor explained. “This one,” he pointed to the two-meter tall one, “is the one that was used to burn down the forest; Hemark had them mounted over the gates of the city in case an invading army ever showed up.”

“So our suspect will likely have one of these,” Salee summed up. She looked around the museum for anything else that might give her some inspiration. Then she realized that she didn’t need to do that. “Gomor, you’re a useful man to have around.” Why try to glean everything she could from these artefacts when she could bring all of the knowledge with her. “I’d like you to accompany us to meet the other members of the Council. What do you say?”

His mouth fell open, and he looked to Denik and Gilm as though confirming that they’d heard the offer too. “Absolutely!” he answered.

Salee stood and headed for the door before the others could even get out of their chairs. “We’d better hurry, then.

Sarah and Satan: Blind Date

Mariah picked up the wine and sloshed a bit more into her glass, leaving the bottle empty. It was the end of a gorgeous summer day, and still perfectly warm out even though the sun had gone down over an hour ago. We had dinner together out on the patio, looking out over Satan's beautiful garden full of colorful vegetables and the fragrant smell of spices. I was never much of a green thumb, so it was nice to have all of this available for when I cooked.

"What's the deal with your roommate, anyway?" Mariah asked, acting as though it were just a casual remark and not something that had been on her mind all evening.

"You know," I started, watching my words very carefully. I'm a bit of a lightweight, especially with red wine. "He's a pretty normal guy. He's a lawyer, so he works a lot. But he also hangs out at home, plays video games... nothing extraordinary." *Nothing except for the whole 'Lord of the Underworld' thing.*

She took another sip, not making eye contact with me. "Yeah, but like... is he single, or dating someone...." Her finger absentmindedly traced a circle on the table.

"Oh!" Knowing his true nature, I'd tried to pretty much put that idea out of my mind. I remembered what was really underneath his unassuming, unremarkably handsome exterior. "He's..." Well, shit. I didn't even know how to answer. Was he single? He'd never mentioned a girlfriend or anything. Did he even date? "Well, I actually don't know," I said.

"You don't know if your *roommate* is single?" she asked.

"I guess we just don't talk about his personal life very much," I answered. Though, Satan knew every detail of my burgeoning relationship with Aaron. In fact, he probably knew more than I did, thanks to his handy little file of information.

"Well, does he have women over to the house often?" Mariah asked. She'd abandoned the pretense of just mild curiosity. I half-expected her to get out a legal pad and start taking notes.

I thought back. Most of his visitors were demons who came stomping into the living room through the fireplace pretty regularly. But they weren't even human; they were

roughly half my height, muscular, with leathery red skin and evil-looking yellow eyes. And although I assumed they were male, I really had no idea. Satan wouldn't date one of *those*, would he?

The only possibility that I would consider a serious prospect for him was a Succubus that I'd seen visiting with Satan a few times. She had long, shimmering blonde hair and a dazzling smile, and Satan generally seemed to be in a pretty good mood when she was around. And of course, she was always trying to flirt with him, putting an arm on his leg and wearing the most revealing outfit possible. But I just assumed that was her nature.

"I guess he has some women over sometimes," I told her, sipping at my wine to hide my expression. I've got the worst poker face in the world when I'm tipsy.

Her eyebrows arched. "No one particular one, though?"

I shook my head. That caused her to smirk a bit.

We sat in silence for a moment, listening to the crickets chirp out in the gardens. I was desperately trying to think of a way to change the subject, but coming up blank.

"So, is there any reason that he's still single?" Mariah asked, inching closer to what she really wanted to ask. "He's not weird, or anything?"

"Well..." Let's see. I tried to imagine a first date with Satan, and what we'd talk about. Maybe he'd talk about his timeless feud with God and how we should all be thanking him for giving the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge to Eve. Or maybe he'd discuss his work, showing off that he'd managed to claim the soul of the latest celebrity whose death was currently all over the papers. "They'll look great on the newest brochure for Hell," he'd assure me. Or maybe we could do a group date, and Satan would bring all of his stubby-horned demon friends. Yes, the ones who regularly dined on human flesh (some of which was currently in the refrigerator). "He's got terrible taste in music," I finally answered. "Seriously. He's got a One Direction poster in his room." That part was actually true. He loved the band, but only because he would go to the concerts and rake in souls from fathers who'd do anything for a set of earplugs and a beer.

Mariah laughed and took another sip of wine, building the courage to finally ask. “Well, if he’s single... and the worst thing about him is his taste in music...” She gave a kind of embarrassed shrug, like ‘I shouldn’t have to ask this.’ “Well, maybe you could set us up?”

Oh boy. I took a big gulp of my wine; a sip wouldn’t be enough anymore.

“I mean, if you’re OK with it,” she added quickly. “If you’ve got a thing for him, I totally get that. You just nee...”

“No!” I cried out. “No, no. It’s not that. Really. I just...” I was out of excuses. “I just don’t know if he’s looking for a serious thing right now.” I took another gulp, picturing Satan and Mariah getting married next to a lake of fire and having a whole litter of little red babies. “But I can ask him, if you really want.”

“Ask him what?” Satan’s voice came through the screen door behind us. I jerked around so quickly that I nearly lost my grip on my wine glass. He was still wearing his suit and carrying his briefcase, so he must have just gotten home from work. Hopefully he hadn’t heard too much of the conversation.

“Nothing!” I shouted, far louder than I’d wanted. Like I said: horrible poker face. “Just... we’re just chatting, you know. S...” *Whoops! Almost said his real name.* “Lou, you remember my friend Mariah, right?”

Mariah gave him her most seductive, alluring smile. I noticed her squeezing her arms against her chest, trying to make her breasts look bigger. But Satan barely glanced at her; just a quick nod. “Yes, hello. Good to see you again.” He turned back to me. “I’ve got a bit more work to do, so I’ll be in the office. Just ignore the smoke detector if it goes off.”

That sometimes happened when God visited via the potted plant in the study. I nodded back. “All right. We’ll stay out of your way.” I wouldn’t want to have to explain anything to Mariah, anyway. Satan vanished back into the house, and we heard the door to his office close just a moment later.

“Smoke detector?” she asked, clearly confused.

“Oh, he... probably having a cigar, you know. He does that sometimes.” I gave a weak smile and finished off my wine in one gulp.

She nodded, accepting the answer. “So... maybe you’ll mention it to him?”

I was out of excuses. “Sure.”

Satan sat on the couch, reading his favorite book: Faust. He’s a bit of a narcissist that way. Beelz snoozed contentedly in his lap with her belly up and her paws splayed out in every direction.

“So, Satan...” I was in the kitchen, slicing onions for the soup. “You’ve met my friend Mariah, right?”

“Which one is she again?” He didn’t even take his eyes off of the page. *Not a good sign.*

“She was here the other day.” I chopped the onions, doing my best to keep my tone nonchalant. “You know, with the curly hair and the dark eyes? She’s really pretty. She goes to yoga like four times a week.”

“Yeah, I remember.” He put a bookmark on the page and closed the cover. “What about her?”

I put the onions into the olive oil, and they instantly began to sizzle. The savory smell filled the entire kitchen and living room. “I don’t know...” I stirred the frying pan. The moment he looked into my eyes, he’d know. I’m a terrible actress.

“You want me to date her,” he answered.

“Wha... That’s...” His smirk only grew with each one of my obviously fake denials. “Ok yes. She thinks you’re really cute, OK? How did you know?”

“Oh, God’s been teasing me about it all week, the big know-it-all. Apparently Mariah prayed to him about it and he’s been on my case ever since. Figures that this is the *one*

prayer he’d actually hear. God says he’s going to send St. Valentine himself to officiate the wedding.”

“*Wedding?*” I hadn’t even *thought of* that possibility. Suddenly I was picturing Mariah in a white dress surrounded by demons and hellbeasts and Satan, all wearing tuxedos.

What venue do you use to host a wedding in Hell?

“Oh, don’t worry,” Satan reassured me. “Just because he’s omniscient doesn’t mean he goes around spoiling the future for everyone. He’s just kidding!” But his face grew troubled. “At least, I think so. Sometimes God’s sense of humor is a little... quirky. Just ask Jonah.”

“I don’t want you to necessarily *marry* her! Maybe just like... go out for drinks or something. I mean, do you... like... do you date human women?”

“I do,” Satan answered. “I’m just not sure that I’m really ready to get back out there, you know? I just got out of a pretty serious relationship.”

“Wait, *really?* How come I never saw her around?” I’d been living here for a little over eight months now, and Satan had *never* mentioned *anything* about a serious relationship. Nor had any woman come by the house, just like I’d told Mariah.

“Yeah. Her name was Sarah, too. We had a little falling-out, and before we could patch things up, she... passed away,” Satan answered. His eyes were trained on the book cover so that I wouldn’t see his face, but the sad frown was obvious. “And now she’s stuck in purgatory. For who knows how long.”

“I’m sorry,” I told him. I suddenly felt guilty about trying to set him up when his girlfriend just *died*. “If I’d known, I really wouldn’t have...”

“No, it’s OK,” He gave a heavy sigh. There was a momentary silence between us, filled with the sizzling of the onions that I’d forgotten about entirely.

“Do you mind if I ask... how she died?”

He got up from the couch, placing Beelz gently on a cushion. “It’s ok,” he said, coming into the kitchen and grabbing a beer. He popped the cap off and gave a heavy sigh.

“She was hanged for witchcraft.”

“*Hanged? For witchcraft?*”

He took a sip of his beer and gave a solemn nod. “Yeah. I *told* her not to try this spell, but she thought I was being too controlling, and she just did it to prove a point. And

then sh..."

"When was this?" I interrupted. No one gets hanged for witchcraft anymore!

"It was, ummm..." His eyes rolled upward like the answer would be written on the ceiling. "Like, three hundred years ago? Up in Massachusetts when it was first being colonized."

"Three *hundred* years!?" I rolled my eyes at him. "Come on, Satan. I'm all for giving you your space to grieve and whatever, but I think *centuries* is plenty of time. You gotta get back out there!" From the couch, Beelz gave a loud meow of agreement.

"Sarah, time runs differently when you're immortal, OK? Three hundred years really isn't that long." He returned to the couch and picked his book back up. Beelz, recognizing the return of his warm lap, stretched her back legs and strutted across the couch toward him. "I appreciate the effort. Really. And your friend Mariah *is* pretty cute." The beginnings of a smile began to tug at his lips... then disappeared just as quickly. He took a swig from the bottle and opened the book again. "I just don't know if I'm ready yet."

"All right." I went back to cooking, and Satan went back to reading silently. I could recognize when I'd lost.

But after only a few minutes, Satan closed the cover again. "Well, what is Mariah like?" I dropped the spoon, abandoning my cooking in an instant. "Oh, she's great! She's really outdoorsy; plays all kinds of sports, and really loves to go hiking." So, kind of the opposite of me; I'm the definition of a homebody. "And she's really smart. She does something with statistics and data analysis and stuff that I don't even understand. And she has a really good sense of humor too."

Satan didn't respond immediately. He just took another sip of beer and petted Beelz.

"*One* date," he finally answered. "That's all I'll promise."

I awoke to the steady drip and overwhelming aroma of brewing coffee wafting in from the kitchen. Morning light streamed through the sliding door, right onto my eyes. I sat up, blinked quickly to adjust, and tried to figure out why I wasn't in my bedroom.

“Morning,” Satan called from the kitchen. Right on time, the coffee machine dinged to let us know it was finished. “Can I get you a cup?”

“Sure.” I struggled out of the blanket that Satan must have put over me sometime in the night. “I fell asleep,” I told him, still a bit groggy; I’m not much of a morning person. He laughed as he continued making breakfast. “Yeah. I noticed.” From behind the counter, I heard the rough scratching of cold butter across hot toast.

I looked back down at the couch. “I was...” Then it all came back, and I jumped off the cushion like I’d been struck by lightning. “I was waiting up for **you**! How did the date go?!”

Satan came out of the kitchen holding a plate of toast and a mug of steaming coffee. He came around the couch wearing grey sweatpants and his old Duke T-shirt that had holes in every seam. He sat down on the plush easy chair next to the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. “It was all right.”

The only sound in the living room was the *crunch* of Satan biting into his slightly-burnt toast. I just gawked at him with my jaw hanging open. He looked up from his breakfast and we locked eyes. “What?” he asked through a mouthful of bread crumbs.

“THAT’S IT?” I shouted at him.

He winced and dropped his toast back onto the plate. “Geez, not so loud!”

“THAT’S ALL YOU HAVE TO SAY?” I continued shouting over him. “It was ‘all right’?! COME ON!”

“What?!” he asked. “It was *fine*! What more do you want?”

“Tell me *everything*!” I shouted. “I want to know every single detail! Where did you go for dinner? What did you have? What did Mariah have? Did you get desse...”

“Slow down, Sarah,” Satan chided. “Just... chill out.” He took another bite of his toast and took forever to chew. Then, just when he swallowed and I thought he was going to continue, then he lifted the mug of coffee to his lips and took a long sip. That drink took an eternity to end. And when he was *finally* done with that, his hand *moved toward the toast again*.

“OH, COME ON!” I yelled at Satan. He was just doing this to torture me! “You’ve GOT to give me more than that!” He just started laughing, so I got up from the couch to find my cell phone. “You know what? I’m just going to call Mariah and get the details from her anyway.”

He reached out and lightly pushed me back down to the couch. “Sarah, Relax! It was nice, OK? There really isn’t that much to tell. We went out to dinner, th...”

“At Giattso’s?” That was the place that I’d recommended. Aaron had taken me there on one of our first dates.

He smirked and nodded. “Yes, at Giattso’s. Just like you recommended.”

“What did you have?” I interrupted before he could continue. I knew it was annoying him, but come on! I needed *details*!

“She had the carbonara, and I roasted and ate our waitress whole. Now can I *please* get on with the story?”

I scowled, crossed my arms, sat back against the cushion, and arched my eyebrows to tell him to continue.

“Look. We went out, we had a nice dinner, we went for a walk down on the wharf... you know, normal date stuff. No big extravagant story.” He took another bite of toast and looked away like there was nothing else to tell.

“But it went well?” I asked. Satan nodded mid-sip. “So.... you’re gonna call her again, right?”

That caused him to choke on his coffee. “Sarah...” he said when he was done sputtering, looking like a parent who had to deliver the news that the child’s puppy had ‘gone to live on a farm upstate.’ “Like I said, we had a nice time and all...”

The stairs creaked, and Satan and I both whirled to look. Mariah descended into the living room wearing her slightly-wrinkled date outfit and a bashful smile. Satan quickly jumped from the couch and met her at the bottom of the stairs while I just gawked. *She stayed the night with him!*

“Hey, you,” she said, kissing him on the lips. Peeking over his shoulder, she gave me an awkward wave. “Morning, Sarah...” I waved back and looked away, not wanting to intrude too much on the end of their date.

“Coffee?” Satan suggested, heading toward the kitchen to fetch her a mug.

“No, I’m OK,” she said. “You know I’ve got to get going.” I was intently looking at a magazine from our coffee table and trying to seem uninterested even as my ears strained for every word. “But I... I had a great time last night.”

“Me too,” Satan assured her.

“Good.” She kissed him again. “Well, I can’t wait for Date #2, then!” With that, Satan led her to the door and walked her out to her car in the parking lot. I jumped up from the couch and dashed over to the dining room window to watch as she gave him one final kiss goodbye and then drove away.

“You slept with her!” I shouted as soon as he walked back in. I was practically dancing around the apartment. “I can’t believe it! That’s so great!” Some people wouldn’t approve of having sex on the first date, but being the Devil’s roommate has a way of making all of that moralizing seem kind of pointless. “I’m so glad you guys hit it off; I knew you would!”

Satan sat back down at his coffee and toast. “Yeah... listen, Sarah. There’s not going to be a second date. I’m not going to call her again.”

I gaped at him, half in shock and half in disbelief. All the energy drained away in an instant. “But you... I mean, you said it went well... and you had sex with her.”

He shrugged. “She was all right, I guess.”

I sat back down too. “I just can’t believe it. I didn’t think you were the type of person to hook up with someone on the first date and then just leave them waiting for you to call. Who *does* that?”

He took a sip of his coffee, then smirked. “I mean... I am *Satan*...”

Merry Christmas, Satan

The ladder shook just a bit as I climbed up onto the top step and delicately placed the star atop the tree. It was a little off-kilter, but that's fine. I'm not going break my neck trying to get it exactly straight. Satan wasn't much of a perfectionist either, and if it bothered him that much, he could fix it himself. I climbed back down the ladder, plugged in the lights, and took a seat on the couch to admire my handiwork.

Everything looked so perfect. The tree with delicate glass ornaments was like something out of a movie, the fire in the fireplace was roaring and crackling, and the three stockings on the Hearth were even emblazoned with our names. I'd gotten one for Beelz, along with an adorable little green elf hat for her; Satan would love that. He hadn't mentioned anything about Christmas yet, but I wanted it to all be a surprise.

From the hallway, I heard the front door open. Speak of the devil!

He threw his briefcase on the table and heaved a giant burlap sack off of his back. It landed on the table and tipped over, spilling dozens of envelopes onto the floor. His normal polite smile had been replaced with a frustrated grimace. Then, he glanced around the room at everything I'd put up. "What the hell is all this?"

"I decorated!" I answered, gesturing around the room. "For Christmas! I even baked cookies!" It was my first real Christmas away from home; setting up a dingy plastic tree at Tom's and putting my gifts for him under it didn't really count. He always claimed that the holiday had been ruined by 'commercialism,' and that he had better things to do with his money than join in on the frenzy 'like a mindless shark,' as he put it. So this year, I was determined to do it right.

“Sarah...” Satan clenched his jaw and massaged his temples. “I have to deal with God *all day* at work. You think I want to come home to a 2-month-long birthday party for his son? You think I like listening to non-stop songs about how great God is?”

“I... didn’t really think about it...” I stammered. “I don’t see it as a very religious holiday. It’s more about the atmosphere, and gift giving...”

“Oh, don’t even get me *started* on that crap,” Satan interrupted. “Look at this!” He grabbed the burlap sack in both fists and shook a gigantic pile of letters out onto the floor. “How many letters do you think I get every year just because some dumb kid can’t spell *SANTA*?” He shook his head. “I swear, God did that on purpose. Why can’t they just call him Nick? That is his name, after all. *Noooo*, he has to have a nickname that’s spelled with the exact same letters as *my* name.” He kicked the pile of letters, sending envelopes skittering into the kitchen. “We’re not allowed to try to get soul commitments from kids, but God skirts that rule all the time. He gets ‘em when they’re young with all of this ‘Santa expects you to be a good boy’ business. It’s bullshit!” Beelz stood from her throne and stretched, causing the bells on her little feet to tinkle. Satan rolled his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I looked around the room at all of my work. “I really didn’t think about it. I’ll take it down.”

Satan snapped his fingers, and the decorations all disappeared. The letters on the table all burst into flames and incinerated, which thankfully didn’t leave any scorch marks or even ashes on the table. He grabbed a beer from the fridge and came to sit next to me on the couch with a tired sigh. “It’s all right,” he said. “I just don’t get what all the fuss is about. So Jesus was born. Big deal.”

I bit my lip and nodded. I guess I didn’t need to have the tree and the stockings and all that. I don’t think Satan had even noticed Beelz’s costume.

“Can I at least watch a movie?” I asked. “It’s one of my favorites. I was really looking forward to it. And I actually think you’ll like this one!”

“A *Christmas* movie?”

I nodded. “Well, kind of.”

He rolled his eyes and took a sip of beer. “What’s it called?”

I held up the DVD case for him to see. “It’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.”

He smiled at the skeleton on the cover and let out a little ‘huff’ of laughter. “I guess that would be OK.”

I popped the DVD in and turned on the movie. Satan pulled a magazine from the coffee table and pretended to read. But I noticed him tapping his foot and bobbing his head before the first song was even over.

“Well?” I asked as the credits began to roll. “What did you think?”

Satan had given up all pretense of not paying attention roughly 20 minutes into the movie, and the magazine lay forgotten on the coffee table. He’d also eaten at least ten of my Christmas cookies, and seemed to particularly relish eating the Santa-shaped ones head-first. “It was all right,” he lied.

“Uh huh.” I did my best not to smirk too much.

Satan sighed and snapped his fingers. The Christmas tree, lights, stockings, and Beelz's little costume reappeared instantly. It even started snowing outside, which is practically unheard of around here. "You're a bad influence on me," he said as he got up from the couch. "I guess this means I need to get you a present now."

Sarah Starts Dating Again

Satan's head swiveled and looked at me as soon as I walked through the door. I'd tried to close the door softly in case he was asleep, but apparently that wasn't the case. He was sitting on the couch eating cereal with Beelz on his lap, watching *The Office* on Netflix for the hundredth time. He paused the show and checked his watch. "Date must have gone pretty well!"

I blushed. "You didn't have to wait up for me, Satan."

"Nonsense!" He gently placed Beelz on a nearby cushion and vaulted over the back of the couch. "So! Tell me everything. How did it go?"

"It was fine..." I avoided his gaze by going into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"That's it? That's all I get? *Fine*? Where did you *go*? What did you *do*?"

Ice clinked in the glass, and I reached for the Brita filter in the fridge. "Well..." A smile was beginning to spread across my face, despite my best efforts. "Aaron took me out to dinner at Café Fiorenza..."

"Ooooh," Satan interrupted with eyebrows raised. "Fancy!"

"And after that, we went to a jazz concert in the park and took a walk."

"Sounds like a nice date," Satan told me. Beelz purred in agreement from the couch.

"Yeah, it was." I rested my purse on the back of one of the dining room chairs, where I normally put it. Some of Satan's work stuff was spread across the table. Black candles,

spellbooks, that sort of thing. I was about to turn away, when I noticed that one of the black folders was labeled... with *Aaron's name*.

"Satan..." I picked up the file; it was full of papers, at least an inch thick. I flipped open the cover and found a large picture of the man that I'd just gone on a date with. I turned back toward him and held it up. "What is this?"

Satan smirked. "It's a little surprise for you. I had my boys in the research department pull up everything we had on Aaron. Likes.... Dislikes... fears... secrets..."

"I..." I closed the cover of the folder. "I can't look at this! That defeats the whole purpose of actually going on dates and getting to know him!"

Satan returned to the couch, put his feet up on the ottoman, and picked up his cereal bowl. "Well didn't you google the guy? Check out his facebook before going out tonight?"

I wanted to put the folder back down on the table... but I didn't. "That's different, though!"

Satan laughed into his Lucky Charms. "How? How is that different?"

"Well, that's... Google and stuff is all public. And *he* is the one that friended *me* on Facebook. Everything on there is stuff that he wanted me to see."

"Exactly," Satan answered. "Stuff that he *wants* you to see. It's easy to put on a nice face, isn't it? Tom seemed nice at first too, didn't he?" I opened my mouth to respond to that, but the words just didn't come out. "Wouldn't you have wanted to see this kind of file on Tom before you wasted years of your life on that guy? Wouldn't you have wanted to know what a psychopath he was?"

That was a pretty good point, I admitted to myself. A little scrap of paper was hanging out of the file, and I could just barely see the beginning of the some text written on it. God damn did I want to read it!

“No!” I tossed it down onto the table with a loud ‘thwack’ sound. “I’m not going to do it. I’m going to get to know him the normal way. And eventually I’ll find out the bad stuff too, as I get to know him. *Any* guy would probably look terrible if I just read a list of all the bad stuff he ever did all at once.”

Satan shrugged and lifted the spoon back into his mouth. “Your choice. But it’s here if you want it.”

My eyes darted back down to the folder on the table. I could still pick it up. Maybe just a little peek?

Summoning all my willpower, I managed to step away from the folder and headed toward the stairs up to my room. Satan unpaused *The Office*, and Michael Scott’s voice filled the living room again.

“Just one last thing,” I said, already halfway up the stairs. Satan paused the show again and looked back at me. “Is he... I mean, overall, is he an OK guy? He’s not another Tom?”

There was a long, pregnant pause. “Yeah,” Satan answered with a soft smile. “He’s cool. I probably would’ve gotten rid of him already if he wasn’t.”

I nodded, unable to hold back my smile. I was happy to hear that, because I really did have a good time on the date. “Thanks.” I headed back up the stairs, and Satan unpaused his show once again.

“The tentacle porn thing is pretty weird, though,” he called after me.

The Guerilla of Gotham

[\[WP\] The last man on earth is Batman.](#)

A deafening roar shattered the fragile silence of Gotham's streets. The inky night sky was suddenly lit with fiery explosions erupting from the jagged, spiky spires of the Sa'il surveillance facility. The entire structure collapsed in one last cataclysm and toppled over onto its side. It hadn't actually been too hard to infiltrate; Batman knew the tunnels in that area of town well. The facility was built on top of the remains of Wayne Tower, after all.

He watched the explosion from afar, atop one of the towers that used to support Westward Bridge. The roads had been one of the first things that the Sa'il destroyed during the initial invasion. The invaders were well-versed in strategy, and destroying critical infrastructure had severely impeded the military's response. Not that it would have mattered: Sa'il armor was nearly indestructible to conventional weapons. It had taken Batman nearly two years to finally create an acid-laced explosive that was powerful enough to breach their hulls. By then, it was too late for the world.

Batman spread his wings and fluttered back down to the Batboat moored to the crumbling base of the tower. The Sa'il systems would shoot down any flying vehicle, but they had a blind spot for water vessels. He turned on the near-silent engine of his own design and motored back upriver toward Wayne Manor. Somehow it survived the initial bombardments and subsequent invasion. The Sa'il had likely just seen it as an abandoned building, like so many others across the country. They'd never discovered the secret caverns underneath. The boat sidled up next to the dock, and Batman promptly sunk it down into the muddy water, where it would wait until it was needed again. He slipped up the lawn, avoiding the small graveyard where his parents lay. Where he'd had to bury Alfred and Robin in between Sa'il patrols and flyovers. Where he'd also planted a gravestone for Bruce Wayne. Not a single *person* had been able to escape the massacre; only a lone bat.

Soft footsteps echoed through the cavern as he made his way back to the lair. It was dead silent; the bats were out hunting now. Batman turned on the surveillance monitors to watch the Sa'il ships hovering over the city, searching the ruins with infrared beams. Desperately trying to find any hint of the lone saboteur who had caused such damage over the past few years. And tonight's destruction of the newly-constructed Sa'il surveillance headquarters would ensure that they never would

find him. It wasn't a *permanent* solution, of course, but it would buy sufficient time to come up with one.

All conventional methods had failed to stop the Sa'il. They had ravaged the military, shot down the government's nuclear weapons, and even defeated the Justice League. The Flash, Wonderwoman, Green Lantern... all dead. Batman had watched them fall one by one until it was just him and Superman. And then even he had been captured, taken off world to who knows where. Maybe hurled into the sun. All Batman knew was that he was now alone. If the Sa'il were going to be defeated, it would require *unconventional* methods instead.

Batman removed his cowl, scratched at his graying hair, and gazed at the foggy tube across the cave. It was the culmination of years of work and research that had taken much longer without the resources of Wayne Enterprises at his disposal. But he had finally done it: gathered all of the necessary parts, material, and know-how to clone a person. And of course he had needed those brain scans from Arkham to recreate the most important part. It was just a waiting game now until the specimen was ready. His eyes focused on the huddled mass at the center of the tube. "You're our last hope," he told it. From the file's cover photo, attached to the right side of the tube, the cackling grin of his old arch-enemy smiled back.

A cloud of vapor rose to the roof of the cave as the revival tube's locks disengaged and the cover opened. The Joker took a bouncing stride out and spread his arms wide, as though he was expecting a spotlight to snap on out of nowhere. And he was disappointed when that didn't happen. Joker eyed Batman across the room, then took a moment to take in his surroundings. A thousand gleaming eyes watched silently from the roof of the cave, and Joker gave a chortle of laughter upon recognizing what they were. "Batsy! *Fantastic* place you've got here! Why am I not surprised that it's an actual cave, with actual bats? Gotta give it to you, you're dedicated! It's just one of the things I love about you."

"Hello again." The gruff whisper carried through the otherwise-silent cave.

Joker strutted around the room, admiring Batman's collection of villainous relics: the Penguin's cane-sword, Two Face's coin, Freeze's ice gun, and Killer Croc's collar.

"What a sentimentalist you are, Bats!" He got to the display case with his clown-face

detonator. “Aww, you shouldn’t have! You really *do* care!” With an enthusiastic cackle and accompanying grin, he dashed across the room and planted a giant kiss on the side of Batman’s helmet. Then he went back to admiring the collection of mementos.

“Joker, I brought you back to life for a reason. I need your help.” The supercomputer sprang to life and began airing videos of the Sa’il invasion. The ruins of Arkham Asylum burning after an orbital bombardment. A hole being disintegrated in the side of Wayne Tower and the rest of it toppling over into central Gotham. Sa’il shocktroopers indiscriminately firing into a crowd of human civilians. Plumes of smoke drifting away from gigantic furnace facilities where the Sa’il disposed of human remains. “Everyone’s dead, Joker. Everyone. I can’t find a single living human within five hundred miles of Gotham. They killed you too, though you can’t remember it.” The memory scans that Batman recovered were from before the war, so naturally Joker wouldn’t have memories of his own death.

“Those bastards!” Joker slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. “No one kills me but *ME!*”

Batman ignored him. “I’m out of options, Joker. They’ve smashed the military, killed off everyone in Gotham, and no matter how many of their ships I destroy, more of them keep coming. Settling on Earth. And my plans can’t stop them.” He sighed. After all these years of fighting, it was still hard to say this. “I need your help, Joker.”

Joker cackled. “Oh, Batsy! You know you can always count on me! What are friends for, right?” Then he smashed a fist through the glass display case behind him and grabbed Deadshot’s rifle from off its rack with his lacerated fingers. In the blink of an eye, he had it aimed right at Batman’s chest. “On the other hand, I could just kill you right here and now. That would be fun too!”

Batman shrugged and remained where he stood. “Go ahead. This is my very last attempt. If you’re not willing to help, then you might as well kill me. I’d prefer that than being captured by the Sa’il anyway. At least you’re human.” He gave a sarcastic laugh. “Well, *on the outside*, at least.”

Joker continued pointing the rifle at Batman, grin never wavering. His finger, dripping with blood from the shards of glass, teased the trigger, but didn't shoot. Batman made no effort to disarm the Joker or otherwise get out of his sights. They just stared at each other.

"Oh, what's the point?" Joker cried. He raised the rifle up and rested it on his shoulder. "I always wanted to see your spirit broken like this," he continued, "But I thought that / would be the cause!"

Batman knew exactly what Joker was referring to: it was the look of defeat, visible even under the cowl. He had seen it every morning in the mirror for the past year, ever since Alfred's death. "Well, the only solution is for you to give me hope again," Batman said, only half serious, "so that you can take it away."

Joker cackled. "All rights, Batsy. You've got yourself a deal, then. I'm keeping this, though." He waved the rifle in Batman's face. "She's a beaut! Tell me about these aliens."

Batman turned to the computer to bring up more information about the Sa'il. Joker leveled the rifle at his back and squeezed the trigger with a triumphant grin. But nothing happened. On the screen, images of the autopsy that Batman had done on a Sa'il footsolder came up, with each part labeled. Batman continued typing away, pulling up more and more information. Joker squeezed the trigger again.

"It's not loaded," Batman growled without turning around.

Joker, crestfallen, tossed the rifle aside. It clattered at Batman's feet. "Why must you ruin all my fun?"

"Well?" The Joker danced around the Batcave with glee; he was a seemingly bottomless fount of energy. He planted his feet squarely on the keyboard of the massive supercomputer and somersaulted off, coming to a crash

landing against the rock wall of the cave. But he jumped right back up with an unshakeable, yellow-toothed grin. "What's the plan, Batsy?"

Batman wiped off the keyboard with a black cloth. Somehow Joker had already managed to get his shoes dirty without even leaving the immaculate Batcave. "There *is* no plan," Batman replied. "That's the whole reason that I brought you back; because all of my plans *don't work*. I need *you* to decide what we'll do."

Joker giggled and shook his head like he was clearing water from his ears. "Silly me! Always so forgetful!" He grinned at Batman, who remained utterly stone-faced. "Well, let's see then." He paced, stroking his imaginary mustache like a wise philosopher.

"Guns would be good. Gotta have guns, you know. And some bombs! Lots and lots of bombs! Some kerosene... oooh, and clown shoes! And a fake flower that squirts water! Or acid!"

Batman rolled his eyes. *Why does everything have to be clown themed with this guy?*

"We'll have to work on the clown stuff later," he said, "But as for the guns..." he clicked a button on the keyboard, and dozens of gleaming metal shelves descended from the floor. Each one had row after row of various types of munitions and weapons (nearly all bat-themed in one way or another).

Joker bounced over to the closest shelf and picked up a massive rocket launcher with a whistle of admiration. He looked down the gaping barrel, then back at Batman. "I feel like a kid on Christmas morning! Thank you, Santa!" Throwing the rocket launcher over his shoulder, he skipped down the aisles and collected a veritable armory of weapons. "So glad that I made the naughty list this year!"

"Careful with those," Batman said as Joker juggled four pineapple-sized bombs. "Once activated, they'll start secreting acid to eat through armor before the explosion goes off. It's the only way to pierce the Sa'il armor."

"Sounds fun!" Joker cackled. Before Batman could interject, he loaded one of the bombs into the launcher and pressed the trigger. A second later, the bomb had burrowed through the rock wall across the room and turned it into gravel. Fire suppression systems sprayed thick white vapor until the room was filled with fog and

everything was covered in a layer of dust and debris. Joker, still holding the rocket launcher with a thin wisp of smoke curling from the end, let out an exultant cheer. “Oh Batsy, you shouldn’t have! It’s everything I ever dreamed!” He sprang across the room, wrapped his arms around Batman’s neck, and planted a big sloppy kiss on the side of the black mask’s cheek.

Batman pried Joker off of him and turned off the blaring fire alarms. With that done, he grimaced at Joker and said “There’s a practice range *down the hall* if you’d like to test anything out.” Joker ignored that and continued rummaging through the devices like a kid at a candy shop who couldn’t quite decide what sweets to get. “If you’re satisfied with the weapons,” Batman said, “I can show you my intelligence reports. The Sa’il city is organized into seven different sectors, with defe...”

“No, no!” Joker interrupted. “I don’t need any of that. It just takes the fun out of everything!”

“FUN?” Batman asked through clenched teeth. “You think this is fun? They killed every single member of our *species*. There’s nothing *fun* about this. And if you don’t know what you’re up against, they’re going to kill you in seconds! I saw it happen to *thousands* of soldiers! To *half* of the members of Justice League within the first *month*! You need to be prepared.”

“Like you were?” Joker teased. “Isn’t that your thing, Bats for Brains?” Batman had no response to that; it was true that years of scouting and trying to plan against the Sa’il had gotten him nowhere. They were always two steps ahead. “Relax, Batsy! Put your feet up, have a cold brewski, and let Uncle Joker take care of these big old bad guys!” Joker rubbed his hands together and swiveled his head around. “Now, next up: I’m gonna need some wheels.” His eyebrows were wiggling like furry caterpillars. “Now where’s the Jokermobile, huh? I’ve been itchin’ for a chance to ride this thing for years!” Batman led the way toward the cave’s garage, where the pristine Batmobile sat collecting dust. It could withstand a glancing blow from Sa’il missiles, but a direct hit would punch right through even the strongest armor. Somewhere out there were four shattered wrecks from the Batmobiles that he’d already gone through during the

invasion. This was the last working one in his possession, and possibly in the world unless the ones underneath Wayne Tower has managed to survive under all that rubble. “Oooh, she’s beeeee-u-tee-ful!” Joker enthused, running a hand across the matte black exterior armor. “So dark though! Could really use a splash of color! Maybe a clown face on the front....”

“Don’t even think about it,” Batman growled. “We don’t have any other paint colors anyway.”

“Eh.” The cockpit door slid open, and Joker popped comfortably inside, throwing his sack of goodies into the storage compartment behind the seat. “It’ll do.” The engine revved to life with a roar, and fire from the jet engine sprayed the rear wall. “Oh, she’s got quite a kick!” Joker was practically dancing in the seat and drumming on the steering wheel. “You sure know how to show a girl a good time, Bats!” He pressed his hands to the trigger and unleashed a spray of batarangs that cleaved into the rock across the way. “Come on, Batsy!” He patted the passenger seat next to him. “We’ve got some aliens to fight!”

Batman sighed and cinched his cape tighter. Going out now when the patrols were thickest was a bad idea; they’d be killed within the hour. But on the other hand, this wasn’t his show anymore. Batman had brought Joker back for a reason. And if following Joker’s lead got them both killed... well, so be it. “Fine,” Batman growled. He moved around the hood of the Batmobile and reached for the door handle... and grasped at air. Joker clicked off the brake and surged forward in a squeal of tires, leaving Batman in the dust. “Sorry, Batsy! Too slow!” he shouted as he pulled out of the garage. “Don’t wait up for me!” His trademark cackle bounced through the cave as the Batmobile accelerated away and through the exit.

Batman watched the dot blip across the map. Somewhere high in orbit, one of the last functioning satellites in the world was tracking the Batmobile’s progress as it accelerated away from Wayne Manor and toward downtown Gotham.

“Keep tracking him,” Batman ordered the computer. “Let me know when the Sa’il take notice.” It wasn’t a question of *if* they would take notice. Even the stealthiest incursions

into the city were interrupted by Sa'il scouts about half the time. And the Batmobile was a roaring, loud machine burning its way straight down Gotham's largest highway. Joker may as well have dressed the thing up like a clown and lit it with neon lights.

"Joker." Batman picked up the microphone and turned on the cockpit cameras reotely. Joker's grinning face filled the wall-sized screen in excruciating, disgusting detail.

"Answer me, Joker. I know you can hear me." His own voice came echoing back through the Batcave's speakers.

"Six Sa'il light cruisers approaching," the computer warned. A small picture-in-picture map appeared over Joker's gargantuan ear, showing six red shapes closing in on the Batmobile from every direction. "Weapons hot. They will be in firing range momentarily."

"Joker, answer me." Batman tapped his fingers on the keyboard with no other way to use his nervous energy. "Joker, they're going to be on you in *seconds*." On screen, Joker continued to pretend that he couldn't hear and was busy pressing random buttons on the cockpit to find out what they did. The map began calculating trajectories for their weapons, which corresponded to the booming sounds in the background of the video.

"Oooh, goodie!" Joker laughed to himself, spinning the steering wheel as wildly as possible. The Batmobile spun across the broken asphalt of the highway, accompanied by the screeching sounds of protesting tires. "Some new friends have come out to play!" Batman clicked away at the keyboard, and a drone shot out of the back of the Batmobile for a better view. The flying camera was small enough to escape Sa'il detection, but too small to do anything to help Joker. Not that he needed it: Batman watched in awe as the Batmobile managed to outmaneuver all six Sa'il cruisers. Missile after missile streaked through the air and buried itself in the concrete where the vehicle's wheels had been only seconds ago. Joker was driving so erratically that the Sa'il couldn't figure out where he was going to go. Batman just thanked the stars that the Batmobile was built to maneuver well enough to pull off some of these hairpin turns. "Seven more light cruisers coming in," the computer warned.

“Amazing!” Batman whispered under his breath. They’d actually had to send reinforcements! For just a moment, he had a brief glimmer of hope that his faith in Joker was not misplaced. Gotham’s skyline loomed in the background, and the Batmobile leaped a concrete barrier onto the ramp for the James W. Gordon Memorial Bridge. Then a missile hit the Batmobile on the left side, sending it cartwheeling through the air. The klaxon of alarms in the cockpit was so loud that Batman had to turn down the speakers on the screen, dimming Joker’s ever-present cackle as well. Even through the haze of smoke, his greenish teeth and wide cavernous mouth were still clear. He managed to right the Batmobile and keep driving, leaving a plume of black smoke in his wake. The Sa’il pounded the remnants of the bridge with missiles, over and over again. They weren’t even trying to hit the Batmobile anymore; they were trying to blow the whole damn thing into the river.

“The Batmobile has sustained serious damage,” the computer reported, as if that wasn’t already obvious. It began displaying readouts of all of the damaged systems, which only made Joker laugh harder. Another missile struck as Batman watched, sending nearly all systems into critical mode. The rumbling engine coughed, groaned, and died right as Joker was beginning to accelerate for a jump over the chasm in the bridge.

Another missile struck, peeling away the top of the cockpit and destroying the interior camera. “Nothing like a breath of fresh air!” Joker cackled through the microphone. Through the drone, Batman watched the bridge crumble. The road listed heavily to the side and the Batmobile went careening wildly into an abandoned car. The steel cables holding up the bridge groaned and swayed, before snapping and lashing at the air. Abandoned wrecks went toppling over the side and plunged into the river below. It almost looked like the Batmobile’s gripping tires would hold it in place even as the road sagged at an almost 45 degree angle... and then it went sliding across the pavement and over the side of the bridge.

Through the cockpit microphone, Batman could still hear Joker’s cackling all the way until the Batmobile hit the water.

The bottle made a *pop* sound as the cork came out, and it *tinked* against the glass as Batman poured himself a scotch. It had been years since he'd had any alcohol so as to avoid dulling his senses even the slightest bit. Even when he was playing the role of Bruce Wayne, he was still Batman underneath it all. But now, with the world ending... well, there was no real reason to stay sober. It might even make the whole thing easier. So he'd dug through his father's wine cellar, dusty and full of cobwebs now, and found this bottle. The note attached to the rack said that the scotch was from 1943, and one of only 2 remaining bottles of this brand from the World War II era. There was no price tag, but Thomas Wayne was never one to drink cheap scotch.

He leaned against his chair and took a sip, enjoying the warming sensation in his stomach; the Batcave was always so chilly. On the screen, the computer was calculating the various options for ending the world. With Joker's death, Batman had decided that if humans couldn't have this planet, then *no one would*. And after a few decades of stopping madmen and monsters from trying to do that very thing, Batman had amassed quite the arsenal of doomsday weapons to choose from. So all that was left to decide which one would cause the most damage to the Sa'il. Overheating the Earth's core and literally blowing up the planet seemed like the best option so far, because the debris would destroy the alien ships in orbit as well. On screen, the simulation played out over and over again, scattering the remnants of the planet across the solar system and creating a new asteroid belt between Venus and Mars.

Batman spun in his office chair, sloshing a bit of his scotch over the sides of the glass. His eyes roamed the Batcave that had taken him so many years of work to build. All of the technology he'd created, all of the tools and gadgets that he'd built... all for nothing. "I've wasted my life," he told the bats chittering at each other on the ceiling. They didn't care. "All a waste, just to end in utter failure!" He removed his cowl in disgust and threw it to the floor, took another sip of his drink, then kicked off from the desk to spin in his chair some more.

“Awww, don’t be so hard on yourself, Batsy!” Joker’s voice cackled through the radio.

Batman froze. Still a bit dizzy, he swiveled back to the screen of the supercomputer tabbed away from the simulation of the world exploding, back over to the drone feed where he’d watched Joker and the Batmobile sink under the waves. The only reason it was still up was that Batman just hadn’t cared enough to shut off the drone after Joker’s death. The video feed still showed the scene at the Gotham river with the remains of the James Gordon Memorial Bridge collapsing into the water bit by bit. A few Sa’il ships hovered lazily over the scene, just to make sure that the Batmobile was completely gone. It was built to be airtight, but that was before the Sa’il missile had ripped away most of the cockpit. There’s no way Joker could be alive.

“Great,” Batman told himself. “I’ve gone crazy.” Another sip washed down his throat. “Bound to happen eventually; started years ago.” Even before the invasion, Alfred had urged him to see a professional. The years of isolation and hiding from the Sa’il couldn’t have helped. Giving up all hope must have been the straw that finally broke the camel’s back.

“Welcome to the club!’ the voice called again. Batman ignored the hallucination.

“Shall I trace the source of the signal?” the computer asked.

Batman dropped the glass, spilling expensive scotch all over the floor, and turned back to the terminal. “Yes!” he ractically cried. If the computer was picking it up, it wasn’t just his imagination! “Joker, are you there? Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Bat Buddy!” Joker’s distinctive cackle followed, clear as day.

Batman leaned in, practically touching his nose to the screen from the drone feed. There was no sign of the Batmobile anywhere, nor any life from the river. "What happened?" Batman asked. "How did you survive?"

"Oh oh!" Joker giggled. "A gentleman never tells!"

Batman thumped a fist on the console, still staring at the images from the drone. All he could see were the circling Sa'il ships. But somewhere around there Joker had reached relative safety had still had his personal radio with him.

"Signal triangulated," the computer finally chimed. The hovering drone took off, soaring upwards until the remains of the bridge in the river was just a dark, broken line in the otherwise grey water. Then it swooped back down and came to hover right next to one of the Sa'il cruisers, so close that Batman was concerned that it would be detected. For a moment, Batman thought Joker had been kidnapped, which would have been just as bad as killed. Too many members of the Justice League had been whisked off-planet, never to be seen again.

But as the image from the drone came into focus, Batman realized that the camera was pointed straight at the cockpit window. And through the window, he could see the dripping wet form of the Joker and his broad smile, sitting right there at the controls of the Sa'il ship.

Return of Serenity

"I cannot believe that he actually let you take the old girl out," Zoe said. She cocked her hip, shielded her eyes from the harsh sun, and gazed up at the windows of Serenity's bridge. The whole ship was still clouded in coarse dust from the landing. Serenity was a bit rustier than Zoe remembered, but it looked like she'd gotten a few shiny new replacement parts recently. Enough to keep her in the air at least.

"Yeah, me neither," Selena answered. "But it was either that or I steal her in the dead of night and fly off, so I guess he eventually saw the sense in it." Zoe noted how much her sarcastic grin looked like her father's. "I think Mom played a pretty big part in convincing him too, though she was always pressuring me into Companion training."

Zoe seemed a bit lost in thought. Her smile had changed from surprise to bittersweet sadness. "Sorry," she said at last, shaking the cobwebs from her head. "Just remembering all the times I had on board this ship."

Of course, Selena remembered. Aunt Zoe had been married once, back when she was flying with Dad. And she was married to another crew member who had died. Dad didn't like to talk about it much. Selena placed a comforting hand on Zoe's shoulder.

"Well I'll be a whore's tit!" A gruff voice shouted from the fields. "Don't tell me that's our old boat!"

Jayne emerged from the cornstalks with a huge grin on his face. "And Little Selena Reynolds too! Did old Mal finally get off that little moon again and come for a visit?"

Selena just laughed; her Dad always loved to say that he'd traveled more than enough in his youth and it would take God himself to budge him from that rock now.

"Uncle Jayne!" Selena ran forward and wrapped her arms around his neck in a tight hug. "Fraid not. It's just me. Mom and Dad are still at the ranch back on Theophrastus." Jayne hugged her back with his remaining arm, still strong from working the farm. He never was one to sit back and let others do the work, even with his injury. "Good to see Serenity again," he said, taking a step back. "Best days of my life on that ship, I tell you. Right Zoe?" Zoe stayed silent and solemn, but nodded in agreement.

“So you finally stole yourself a ship, eh?” Jayne continued with a toothy grin. “I always wanted to do that, but Zoe here would have thrown me out an airlock. What are you doing out here, then? You know old Zoe’s just gonna turn you in to the old man.”

“Apparently I don’t need to,” Zoe answered. “Little Selena got the ship from Mal fair and square.”

Jayne’s eyebrows shot up. “Never thought I’d see the day he’d give her up.”

Selena smiled. “Me neither. And I didn’t wait around for him to change his mind. Left before I even had somewhere to go, so I decided to come here. Thinking of putting together a crew... you guys know of anyone looking for work?”

“I’m in!” Jayne volunteered. “What’s the job?”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Jayne, don’t be a fool. Not only are you over seventy, but you lost your gun arm. What do you think you’re going to do? Sass your enemies to death?”

“I can cook!” Jayne argued.

Zoe snorted. “Beans don’t count, Jayne.”

He shot her a look and his mouth started to move as he began formulating a response.

On the porch of the ranch house behind them, some of the farmhands were gathering to admire Serenity.

“I can cook just fine,” Selena interrupted. She knew how those two got whenever they argued. How they managed to run a ranch together for the past few years was anyone’s guess. It probably helped that Jayne managed everything in the fields while Zoe focused on the business end of it. Turns out that Jayne was surprisingly good at yelling at people. “I still need a mechanic, though.”

“What about a pilot?” Zoe asked.

Selena shook her head. “Got a mech to fly it. I don’t even need a nav computer anymore, which is good because it doesn’t work.”

Jayne scowled. “Don’t like those mechs. It ain’t natural.”

“Oh come on,” Selena protested. “You sound like Dad. There is nothing wrong with him. He’s an excellent mechanic, he does exactly what I say, and he...”

“*IT* is an alliance spy!” Jayne insisted.

“Much as it pains me, I’ve got to side with Jayne on this one. Not on the spy part, but I just don’t trust that high-tech Alliance junk.” Zoe scowled; she hated the government just as much as Dad did. Maybe even more, if that was possible. “Just keep an eye on it, all right?”

“I will, Aunt Zoe. He’ll have to do for now till I can scratch up a crew. He’s the one that flew me here.”

“Hell, you looking for a mechanic, you should try Simon and Kaylee’s son,” Jayne said.

“Darriel. Kid’s smart as a whip; probably understands machines better than that robot of yours. Doc keeps pushing him to those inner world academies, but he takes after his mom too much. Takes to the belly of a ship like a fish to water.”

“God,” Selena said, shaking her head, “I haven’t seen Darriel in ages.”

“Yeah, they don’t make it out of the Core very often,” Zoe said. “All the more reason for Darriel to join up with you. Maybe he’ll want to see the rest of the ‘verse.”

Selena nodded, gazing at the mountains in the distance as she considered. If he was half as good a mechanic as his mother, then she couldn’t afford not to have him. Dad swore by Auntie Kaylee’s knack for understanding machines. And Selena had heard a dozen stories of how Serenity only kept flying because of some brilliant fix that she’d come up with.

“All right,” she answered. “I guess I know where I’m heading next!”

Zoe nodded approvingly. “Absolutely. But not until we show you some good old fashioned Highgate hospitality! Boys, fire up the grill!”

The whole Tam family went to meet Selena at the docks, and Simon knew that his eldest son was a lost cause as soon as the boy laid eyes on Serenity. He recognized the exact same expression that his wife got when she was buried in engine parts and swimming around in a pool of grease. Unlike most people in the core planets, Darriel was able to look past the rusted plating and vastly-outdated styling. The old girl didn’t look like much next to the sleek cruisers in the docks on either side, but Darriel recognized the potential in her. Just like his mother had.

“Aunt Kaylee!” Selena called over the sounds of the engines powering down. She rushed out the back of the ship and wrapping her aunt up in a big hug. “I’ve missed you!” Her long black hair flowed over her shoulders, and she was wearing a form-fitting red top. That finally got Darriel to take his eyes off Serenity, and definitely confirmed what Simon already knew: when Serenity departed, Darriel would be on board. Selena hadn’t even asked, but she really didn’t need to: he was more likely to stow away now than to ever make it to the Academy. Simon had been dreading this moment since they first got the wave from Selena telling them that she was on her way to Persephone, but the boy was old enough to make his own decisions now.

Kaylee beamed at her goddaughter and warmly hugged her back. “I thought the Captain would keep you chained to that little moon forever. You’d think after all the wanderin’ he’s done, he’d be more understanding of letting you explore a little on your own.”

“Perhaps all of the bullet wounds that he got during his travels played a part,” Simon said dryly. He also turned to Selena for a hug and embraced her. “I can’t count the number of times I patched up the Captain, and it usually wasn’t a very pleasant experience.”

Selena just grinned. “I just love how you all call Dad ‘the Captain,’ even though it’s been nearly 20 years since you all flew together.” She put her hands on her hips and gestured at the ship with her head in a quick nod. “She’s got a new captain now.”

“Force of habit, I guess!” Kaylee said with a laugh. God, even just saying ‘The Captain’ was bringing back a flood of memories. Her hands were already itching to get back into that engine room to check on the old girl’s ticker. Kaylee had single-handedly kept it running for years, and passing the torch (even to her own son) was turning out to be more difficult than she’d thought.

Next, the twins demanded the newcomer’s attention. Little Hoban grabbed Selena around the waist in a tight embrace, while Ivy raised her little arms waiting for Selena to pick her up. “Gosh,” Selena told Laura as she gently tossed the little girl into the air and caused her flutter to twirl in the wind, “Are you sure that you’re only six? Look how big you are!”

Finally, Selena turned to Darriel, who was quite busy studying the tops of his shoes and turning beet red. She threw her arms around his neck, and he awkwardly hugged her back, unsure of where to really put his arms. "Darriel!" she said with a laugh. "It's so great to see you! We haven't seen each other in forever." His parents exchanged a look and a grin; they'd hoped that going to the Academy might break him out of his shy shell, but maybe a little sojourn aboard Serenity would be just the thing he needed.

"Twelve years," Darriel answered softly. The boy had a memory like a steel trap; he vividly remembered a little Selena trying to put bugs down his shirt while Jayne and her father laughed uproariously and helped her find more of them in the bushes. Normally it was the boys who would pick on the young girls they wanted attention from.

Selena laughed and flashed a smile at him. Her arms lingered on his shoulder for just a moment too long for friends. "At Mom and Dad's 10th anniversary party!" she recalled.

"Oh man, that was a shindig!"

"Yeah," Darriel answered, scratching at his chest subconsciously. "Real fun."

Behind Selena, a shining steel mech emerged from the cargo hold carrying a massive crate that would have taken four men to lift. The Tams, being from the Core Worlds, were far more tolerant of the mech than Jayne and Zoe had been, but even still Kaylee glared at it a bit as it stomped toward the hovering cargo shuttle and slid the crate into a holding area.

"That's your pilot, eh?" Kaylee asked. The mech overheard the comment and waved with one of its free remaining arms.

Selena glanced back and nodded. "I call him Albert. Seems unnatural to just say 'mech' all the time when I'm talking to him."

Zoe and Jayne had been kind enough to give Selena a bit of business shipping some of their steaks to one of the Core's nicest restaurants. It promptly zipped off and joined the stream of shuttles flying overhead in neat, organized lines of traffic. It was more than Selena could ever remember seeing; out on Theophrastus, only a few of the richest people had personal flying shuttles.

“Hmph.” Kaylee crossed her arms and pouted a bit. “Well, Serenity’s engine is a pretty tricky little beast, and it’s got more than a few little inventions of my own. Your mech there probably wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

Serena bit her lower lip and shot a quick glance at Darriel.

“Well, that’s kind of why I’m here...” she said. “I’m in need of a mechanic, and I stopped by Highgate to see Jayne and Zoe before I came here. And they suggested...” she turned to Darriel, “that maybe *you* might want to join me for a b...”

“YES!” Darriel answered a bit too quickly. His face turned red again and he tried to cough to cover up his reaction. “I mean, I think it would be interesting to see some of the Rim planets for a bit... and the Academy will always be there when I get back...”

“Darriel, you are *just* like your father!” Kaylee exclaimed.

Pharoah Maryhathor

The clanging and scraping sounds of digging were gone after months of work, and the tomb was silent. The door, intricately carved with curses and depictions of robbers being hanged, had been carefully uncovered over the course of months. Rubble was brushed away with the utmost care, avoiding any damage to the inscriptions. I would just stare up at it all day as I worked, imagining workers carving these symbols more than four thousand years ago.

Footsteps echoed down the hall. My partner, Kevin, approached carrying flashlights and surgical masks for the both of us. He was sweating profusely; the temperate outside was around 110 degrees fahrenheit, and the tunnel wasn't much cooler. But he didn't seem to notice, and his grin stretched from ear to ear. We had been waiting for this moment for months.

"You do the honors," he said, gesturing to the door. The slabs of limestone had been fitted on a special pivoting hinge that would entirely support the door's weight and allow us to open it without damaging whatever remained of the original hardware. I took a deep breath and rested my hand on the lever, savoring the moment. Years of research had gone into tracking down the resting place of Meryhathor. So little was known about the 9th Dynasty kings, and I was about to fill in that particular gap of Egyptian history. It was my life's work.

The stone groaned and scraped as the mechanical hinge slowly slid it over the threshold, revealing a black opening. My fingers tingled with giddy, nervous energy as I prepared to enter the tomb. The stale smell and eerily cold air coming from the hole didn't faze me in the slightest. I clicked on the flashlight and stepped through the doorway.

It was everything I could have ever dreamed. At the center, a magnificent gilded sarcophagus of enormous size. Surrounding it, all of the trappings of a tomb that an Egyptologist might expect to find: canopic jars, chests of offerings, statuettes... everything. And it was all perfectly preserved; there was no evidence of a cave-in or grave robbery. It was a pristine find, and would be the talk of the academic community for years to come. I moved around the room, admiring a set of inscriptions along the left wall. The carvings were so beautifully; one particular section showed a reed boat drifting down the Nile, and even the petals of the flowers lining the banks were chiseled into the stone. This was a masterpiece!

Everywhere I looked, I found something new. Some amazing piece of artwork that museums would fight over for decades. Some new inscription discussing Pharaoh Meryhathor's rule and all the good he did for Egypt. Behind me, Kevin was similarly astounded. He gasped audibly when he first laid eyes on the golden sarcophagus, and studied the face closely. "European features," he whispered, as though worried someone might be listening. "This is groundbreaking! There's never been anything to show a link to Europe with Meryhathor!" He took out a notepad and started scribbling. "Maybe Greek origins?" he muttered.

I circled the room and spotted an interesting object tucked behind the sarcophagus that had escaped my notice when I first entered. It was a table, with delicate, spindly legs that looked to be made of gold. The surface of the table was not a solid surface, but rather a fine mesh that must have taken forever to craft with tools from that period. And resting on the surface of the table was some type of smooth brick, roughly 5 inches long. What could it be? I couldn't recall anything similar having been found in another tomb.

I crossed the room; Kevin was still scribbling questions on his notepad. He was always so organized. The object was covered in a fine layer of dust, like most of the rest of the room. I blew on it softly, sending swirls into the air. From my pocket, I withdrew the fine, soft brush that we used for very delicate excavations and swept away the remaining dirt.

It was smooth, flawless glass, with some kind of black background. Unlike any other artifact recovered. Egyptians of this period had experimented with glass decorations, but never produced anything more than trinkets or baubles. This was on a whole new level. It almost looked like... but it couldn't be... "Kevin!" I called out; from the corner of my eye, I saw him jump at the sudden noise. "Come look at this!"

He hurried over and knelt down next to me, jaw hanging open as he studied it.

I put on a pair of latex gloves from my pack and picked up the object with just the tip of my thumb and middle finger. The weight was substantial. What could this be used for? I turned it over and held it under Kevin's light, to see if there were any other distinguishing features. There was one.

Under the bright flare of the flashlight, it was indisputably clear. The Apple logo. Under that, the metal was labeled "iPhone."

"*Please* tell me this is yours, Kevin."

It was the first that either of us had spoken in the last five minutes. We stood over the phone laying in the dust, where I'd dropped it in shock. Kevin reached slowly into his own pocket and pulled out his phone to prove that he still had it.

"Fuck..." I whispered. Kevin had no response to that.

"The tomb must have been robbed at some point," I concluded. "Very recently. And one of them left a phone in here. That's the only way to explain it."

"There was dust on the phone," Kevin reminded me. "As much as on everything else in here."

"So it was a prank. Someone knew we were digging for this tomb and came in to play a joke on us. They planted the phone and then covered it with a layer of dust."

"How?" he asked, gesturing around. "There are no other entrances in here. Everything is completely intact! There weren't even any footprints. *How* did they manage to get that massive door open, walk in here, plant the phone, and cover it with dust... without us ever noticing? We haven't left this dig site in the past 3 months!"

I shook my head. "You can't be suggesting what I think you're suggesting," I told him.

He held his hands up like he was surrendering. "I'm not *suggesting* anything," he retorted. "Just looking at the facts. There is absolutely no evidence that anyone has been inside this tomb for thousands of years. And no evidence that that... thing... has been moved for the same amount of time." Kevin wasn't quite ready to acknowledge that it really was an iPhone.

We look back down at it, not sure how to proceed.

I picked it up off the ground, studying it closely. Maybe it was just some extraordinary coincidence. Some craftsmen had made a glass trinket for Pharaoh Meryhathor, and just carved some nice-looking nonsense into the back. And it just *happened* to spell out iPhone. Yeah, that had to be it. Didn't really explain the headphone jack or charging port, though.

I turned it over and over in my hands. It looked practically new. It *couldn't* be thousands of years old.

"We can't tell *anyone*," I told Kevin. "We'll be the laughing stock of the academic community. Before we even announce finding the tomb, we need to know exactly where this came from."

Kevin nodded in agreement. I gingerly set the phone back down on the golden mesh tabletop.

"Let's take another look around for something we may have missed." I waved around the room, at all of the relics and artifacts that we hadn't scrutinized. *Something* in here had to explain it.

Gold. Jewels. Carved amber statuettes. Priceless works of art that museum directors would gouge their own eyes out to get a hold of. All worthless trash.

"Why isn't there anything else here?" I growled, resisting the urge to kick over one of the delicate ceremonial urns near my feet. A day ago, I would have been absolutely elated to be combing through these artifacts, but now it was just frustrating. There was NOTHING to explain the iPhone that we'd found on the table next to Pharaoh Meryhathor's sarcophagus. I opened yet another box, full of dust that had probably once been food for the Pharaoh's journey into the afterlife. Great.

"Mmmhmmm," Kevin answered absent-mindedly from nearby. He'd given up on helping me find some explanation and was studying the hieroglyphics on the walls. I'd looked at a few of them; "Pharaoh Meryhathor summons the floods," and "Pharaoh Meryhathor defeats the desert tribes of whatever..." It was all the same stories and legends that had been found in a hundred other tombs, each Pharaoh trying to self-aggrandize and one-up all of their predecessors. Kevin adjusted the light and ran his fingertips over the inscriptions carved across the stone walls, mumbling to himself as he translated. Then he took a sudden step back. "You need to come see this one," he called out.

Even before reading it, I could tell that it was different. Most of the other panels were decorated with images of gods and portraits, but this one just had row after row of plain text. And the letters weren't carved straight into the stone wall: it was a metal panel; copper turned green by the long years.

"This panel was carved by Pharaoh Meryhathor himself, only for the eyes of gods. Do not remove this metal covering under penalty of death." The message was clearly meant for the workers who put the tomb together. Kevin and I exchanged a look: Something like this had never been found before: the actual words of the Pharaoh. And even before reading it, I knew that this would be the explanation I was seeking. And if not, I would probably go mad and would need to be institutionalized.

We gingerly removed the metal panel. Bits of stone and dust crumbled to floor, and I winced as though experiencing actual physical pain. All the rules of preservation that archaeologists swear by were still ingrained in my mind, but this was too important. One cracked panel was worth finding out how that thing had ended up in the tomb. We gently placed the copper cover on the dusty floor and stood back to illuminate the stone with light.

It was in English. "Hello, Kevin and Christina," the message started.