

Chapter 1: Flight

Matt's day began like all of the others. He woke up early, before the sun had really risen. That gave him enough time to take a shower and put on his work clothing. It was a white button up long sleeved shirt and gray slacks. His closet was filled multiple copies of this very outfit and nothing else.

His apartment was small but it was all he needed. Breakfast was the last part of his routine. He cooked eggs and toast. Flipping the eggs with practiced ease before placing it on his plate. The meal was quickly eaten and he washed the plate.

He barely needed to glance up at the clock on the wall to see the time. He picked up his briefcase and left. He took the elevator down to the garage where his small silver car sat. He drove the car down the gray concrete streets.

Other cars passed him by but he kept his eyes fixed on the road. The drive to the office only took him 30 minutes. The tall reflective office building loomed above as he pulled into the parking lot. He had been here so many times that he didn't even glance up at the building as we walked through the parking lot.

He entered the building and passed by the receptionist without either of them exchanging a word. He rode the elevator up the twelve floors to get to his office. Rows and rows of cubicles and filing cabinets. The place was empty, Matt was the first to arrive.

He passed the empty cubicles until he reached a cubicle at the far end of the room. A little placard on the desk had his name on it and the job title "Accountant". He took his seat and placed the briefcase next to him.

The clock said it was only 8:00am, a full hour before his shift officially began. However that didn't mean much for Matt as he started up the computer on the desk. Now all that existed was numbers and work.

The clock spun as time flew by. Coworkers arrived and moved around Matt. Occasionally one would stop at his desk to ask a question or have a task for him to do but mostly they just left him alone. The clock finally stopped when it showed 9pm. Matt was done for the day. He rose and lifted up his briefcase.

Nobody else was around as he left the quiet office. The lights were mostly off and Matt nodded to the janitor who locked the door to the floor as he and Matt

left. Matt and the janitor got into the elevator along with the janitor's trolley of cleaning supplies.

"Another late night?" Asked the Janitor.

Matt just nodded.

"Want to go get a beer or something? You look like you could use it."

Matt just shook his head, "Thanks for the offer."

They had had this exchange several times before but nothing had ever happened.

"Suit yourself." Said the janitor. They reached the ground floor and Matt left, leaving the janitor to put away the cleaning trolley. Matt passed by the empty reception desk and walked to his car. The drive home was quiet as he passed through the empty dark streets on the way back to his apartment.

The road passed under his car. The day had been just like all the others. He returned to his apartment and began to ride the elevator up to his floor. It was a day like all the others, but now it was different.

The lights in the elevator shut off and it screeched to a halt. There was a rattling and shaking of the elevator. Matt grabbed the railing on the side of the elevator managing to hold on and avoiding tumbling to the ground.

"What the...." He said. Could it be a fire perhaps or just local power loss? His mind passed through the various causes for a power outage. Maybe it was an earthquake, pretty uncommon around here but it was possible.

The elevator shook again. The earthquake theory was beginning to hold more water to Matt. There was nothing he could do but wait and hold onto the railing in case something happened to the elevator. Even if he could press the emergency button for the elevator it was unlikely to do anything until the power had returned.

Then there was a flickering of light. The lights of the elevator turned on once more but this time they were glowing an odd blue hue. Matt looked up nervously but thought that it must be the emergency system kicking in. Still holding onto the railing (just in case) he moved over to the elevator panel.

Lights were on behind the buttons but they had the same blue hue as the rest of the elevator. He pressed the emergency alarm button. Nothing seemed to

happen when he pressed it. He hoped that just meant that emergency services was alerted and that they would help him as soon as they got to the building.

He paused and lowered his finger. He raised up his hand and looked at the palm. He was worried. Should he be worried. He lowered his hand. It really didn't matter did it? He sunk down to the ground, sitting on the floor of the elevator. There was nothing he could do, all he could do was wait.

No, he decided. It was better not to just wait and huddle on the floor. He stood up, about to pull out his phone and see if he could make a call for help.

The elevator shuttered once more and he almost leaped to his feet, his heart pounding. Then he paused, the elevator was moving. The lights were still the same blue hue but the elevator was moving. He was surprised though, he could feel the movement in his body. The elevator was raising up.

He waited, concerned about what was happening. The elevator slowly rose then stopped. The doors creaked open and he could faintly see the hallway. Then the illumination from the elevator ceased. He was standing in a dark hallway. He recognized the hallway. All the floors were the same but he had been to this floor enough that even the subtle clues was enough. This was his floor.

His hand fished around in his pocket for a moment before he pulled out his phone. The light of the screen was almost startlingly bright as he pressed the buttons needed to turn on the phone flashlight.

Matt crept down the hallway towards his apartment. Something felt wrong. It was late and things were normally quiet when he arrived home from work but this was eerily quiet. With the power out he had expected there to be more commotion in the other apartments. However there was nothing. As he stepped down the hallway there was nobody else peaking out from their apartments trying to figure out what happened.

He briefly considered taking the emergency stairs down and evacuating the building. But this was just a power outage right? He would get to his bed, sleep through the night, and then wakeup in the morning and everything would be normal again.

Matt reached his apartment and pulled his keys out of his pocket. It was dark but he only had a couple of keys so finding the right one was easy. He was about

to put the key into the keyhole when he heard a crashing sound. It came from farther down the hall, from one of the other apartments.

He looked at the door and the keys. He just needed to unlock his door and go into the apartment. Just lock himself in, wait until the morning, and get back to work. Everything would go back to normal.

Normal. Matt put his keys back in his pocket. He didn't know what was out there in the darkness but whatever it was he couldn't just ignore it. Maybe somebody needed his help and nobody else was poking their heads out of their apartment.

Emergency lights flickered to life along the floor. Blue lights illuminating a path for him to travel. He was able to turn off his phone light and pocket it. He followed the emergency lights toward the end of the hallway.

As he got closer to the end he could hear crashing sounds. It didn't sound like a domestic argument or anything similar. More like somebody was knocking over furniture with a sledgehammer.

There was an explosion of drywall the literal wall in front of him exploded outward, the panels of walling crashing against the wall across from it, missing him by not much more than a foot. The form of a man came immediately afterward, crashing not just through that wall but through the wall across from it.

Matt didn't have long to watch the man who had been flung with great force through two walls. Out from the hole in the wall floated a woman. It was like shimmering light was coming from all around her. Ethereally silver hair and the appearance of somebody you see on television, perfect almost beyond words. Matt couldn't find words, not just from her appearance but also the fact that she was literally floating in the air.

She was gliding through the air, like it parted before her and she just needed to lean into the empty space to move there.

"Matt!" She called out, her words smooth and clear, almost perfectly ringing. She glided up toward him stopping to look him directly in the eyes. Her face was directly in front of his, while he was a bit taller than her, her feet was hovering over the ground putting them at the same level.

She smiled at him, "Matt, you're here. I'm so glad!" There was warmth in her

voice.

Matt struggled to think, to try and remember if he knew this woman. However as much as he struggled he couldn't put an identity to this woman. He felt like he would absolutely remember somebody like her if he had ever met her before. But there was nothing, he had absolutely no idea who she was.

His mouth twisted as he internally tried to find a response. All he could muster is, "Oh, it is good to see you too." He felt like he should know her and it would be impolite to say that he didn't remember her. Like attending a school reunion and not remembering anybody's name.

Her smile was absolutely glowing, "You really know how to impress a girl you know. But now isn't the time." She twisted in the air, "We still need to deal with him."

The drywall began to crumble some more and then the man stepped out from the broken hole in the wall. Matt hadn't gotten a chance to see him properly when he flew by previously. Now he got a clear look at him and immediately regretted it.

The man wore a thick robe that concealed almost all of his features, a weird wardrobe choice certainly but not the part of confused Matt. It was the fact that instead of arms the man had tentacles coming out from his robe's sleeves. Long purple tentacles.

Matt stepped backward. However the woman didn't seem to worry about the weird man. He hadn't noticed it before in one of her hands was a ball. Around the size of a baseball but it has the silver sheen of metal, steel perhaps. She tossed it at the man, a gentle throw like you might expect then throwing a beanbag. Not hard at all. The man dodged the throw and when the ball hit the wall there was a crash and it passed directly through the drywall which had broken into splinters.

Matt stepped backward as everything was beginning to catch up in his mind. Something was terrible desperately wrong here. Maybe he had hit his head, maybe the elevator had come crashing down and this was just his dying mind making things up. This couldn't possibly be true.

The blue emergency lights immediately went out plunging the entire hallway into darkness. There was still light like a halo emitting from the woman leaving

the place casting shadows everywhere.

"It looks like you aren't quite ready yet." Said the woman, her voice laced with sadness for the first time. The robes man was running closer and closer to them. "If that case we need to get you out of here." She grabbed Matt's hand and then spun around in the air until her feet were pointing toward the ceiling. Matt's stomach lurched and it felt like everything moved, like an elevator suddenly started moving. He began rising upward.

The woman grabbed him, pulling him to her chest and holding tight. He could kinda see over her shoulder as the man also rose upward, crashing into the ceiling. There was the whooshing of air and the hallway began to blur. The woman was moving, floating down the hallway, carrying Matt along with her.

They flew under the man who was just about standing up on the ceiling. His tentacles reaching out to grab the two of them as they flew by. However they lowered closer to the floor... or the new ceiling, Matt didn't know for certain. Then the woman turned, bringing them through the broken dry wall.

Matt barely had time to look at the apartment before they were through it. They passed through the broken remains of the window and were out. Terror courses through Matt as he suddenly released they were in the air, seven stories up. His apartment building was there just out of reached and growing further way.

They rose up in the air, higher and higher, leaving the ground and the apartment behind.

"Look Matt, isn't it beautiful?" Said the woman, joy having returned to her voice and expression.

He held back his horror to look down, he could see the whole city there stretched beneath him. In the darkness of night there was the twinkling of houses. The lights of people. For a moment his terror left him. The lite streets at night has a charming, beautiful quality to them. And he was flying, he questioned if this was a dream, how could any of this be happening.

He tried to ask his question but the sight beneath him made him swallow it. "It really is beautiful."

She smiled wider, "I know. But let's get out of here. Now that I have you we can just escape rather than fighting him."

"Who... what..." Matt finally began to try and articulate his questions. He didn't know where to begin.

"Shush... quiet. I'll answer your questions soon enough." She was still clutching him to her chest. They spun and turned in the air. Then they shot off through the air. The wind whipped about him as they flew through the air. They were high up enough that he couldn't tell how fast they were really going.

He could still feel the fear and know that if this woman released him he would fall to the ground and die. But something about her intrigued him, how long had it been since he felt like this. He wanted to know more, to understand why she knew his name, to understand what had just happened. At those feelings welled up in him the fear slowly began to fade.

Still there was a fear... a niggling doubt.

Chapter # 2: Unknown World

A younger Matt stood in front of a grave. He was wearing black, as was his mother standing next to him. "Johnathon Blakely" was the name written on the grave. His mother was crying. Matt knew he should be crying too but he couldn't, he had just finished high school and had gotten into college. He needed to hold himself together. It was not his responsibility.

He was taller than his mother and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Holding her while she cried. He was the one that needed to take care of her now. He would need to work hard. He would make sure that they were happy and lead a good life. He would need to set aside his childish thoughts and be a man.

Six years later he didn't cry either. He stood in front of two graves now. "Rebecca Blakely" was the name on the new grave. Nobody stood next to Matt this time. He was alone. Yet he didn't cry. What was the point of crying? He had failed. Had he accomplished anything? He had a job now but what was the point of that? It hadn't done her any good.

He had been useless. Now there was nothing left for him.

Every day thereafter he asked himself the question. What was the point of him continuing? The only answer he had was that it would make his mother sad if he didn't. So he continued, day after day. He went to work. He might be replaceable there but they had use of him so he continued. So he continued, day after day.

"Matt. I need you!" The words were clear, echoing in his ears. She held him aloft in the sky, far above the city below. It was like a fog was being lifted from his mind.

"Me?" He asked.

"Yes, you. I've been searching for you. You are the one to stop the Night King. I've been searching for you for so long and now I have finally found you!"

"Found me? Night King?" Matt didn't understand.

"Yes, I found you. I'll explain everything but we need to get to the Lady. You will see everything when we get there."

Matt tried to speak but the woman had accelerated through the sky. The sounds of wind covered almost everything. However he could see tears in the woman's eyes. Her mouth moved wordlessly, Matt wasn't sure but he thought that the word she said was 'finally'

They whistled through the air for what felt like an eternity. Matt could only see the starry skies and the woman's face and hair as they traveled. Then the wind slowed weakened.

"We are here." Said the woman and they spun in the air so that Matt could see they were just outside the city. This was a mountainous area and plenty of people had homes outside the city in the canyons.

They were practically falling with the rate of descent but Matt had lost his fear. They hurtled toward the ground. Matt could see what must be a mansion of some kind getting closer and closer to them. Just as it seemed to late to arrest their fall everything slowed. With the lightness of the feather they touched down. Matt's feet landed on the ground with no more impact then stepping down a single stair.

A garden surrounded them. It was wild, almost completely uncontrolled. Yet

despite the apparent lack of tending the place seem almost controlled with the paths clear and everything seemed designed for aesthetics.

"Where?"

"Hurry. The Lady is waiting." Said the woman. She still didn't walk, instead floating forward down the path. The small landing pad they had arrived on seemed purposefully build to accommodate the woman and they stepped into the overgrown pathways leading toward the manor.

Even in the dark the path was walkable. Lights illuminated the path and there were lights on in the manor ahead of them. They reached the manor in but a minute of walking. The woman opened the back door and they walked inside.

The place had the same look about it. It was like the place had been abandoned. Furniture covered with white clothes were scattered around the place but not a speck of dust could be seen on the mantles. Old painting frames were still hung on the walls but there were no paintings inside those frames.

Matt wanted to ask more questions but he felt that those would also just be brushed off so instead he just watched quietly as they walked down the hallway of the apparently abandoned mansion. Questions began gathering in his mind. All the confusion and excitement from the night was beginning to fade, replaced with questions, too many questions.

It began with the woman in front of him. The question wasn't who she was or even why she knew who he was. It was something much more fundamental. How was she floating? The impossibility of it has been drowned in the danger of the robed man and the exhilaration of flying but the question remained. Everything he thought he knew had been shattered and broken by the simple act of her floating in the air.

Finally the woman turned to a door. She opened it and floated through the doorway. Matt followed. The room was covered in paintings. They were all over the walls hung on racks in the corners.

A woman in a white dress was painting something in the middle of the room. She was clearly The Lady but Matt's eyes were instead drawn to the painting in the center of the far wall. A man was depicted in the painting. The man was wearing the same white shirt and gray slacks that Matt was wearing right now.

The face was more indistinct but Matt somehow knew that it was a depiction of him.

Him with a sword, fighting off a giant monstrosity. A creature of many tentacles. The combined to a squid like body that almost resembled a man. Except the "man" had eyes in the center of its chest. It also wore a red crown on its eyeless human-like head.

"That..." Matt said as he stepped closer to the painting.

"Matt against the Night King." Said the woman who had floated up to his side.

Matt looked over to the woman painting. She hadn't seemed to even notice their approach, still focused on the painting. Her hair was thick and dark, hanging around her, unkempt. "And she is?"

"The Lady. She never speaks so I don't know her actual name. But she paints."

"And those paintings are prophetic?"

"Yes... mostly. Imagined futures."

Matt looked over at the Lady again. This time the Lady turned her head and they made eye contact. It was held for a long moment then the Lady turned back to her painting.

"I'm supposed to fight this Night King? How I am supposed to do that? With just a sword? You can fly... wouldn't that be more useful?"

She paused. She sunk down lower to the ground, the tips of her toes touching the floor for a moment before she rose back up again. "I can't. My magic is poor at harming something as strong as the Night King. And the Lady doesn't have any magic that is relevant for the fight."

"Magic? Like wands and spells? I don't think you did anything like that."

She giggled, "Not like that silly." She paused, "But I suppose you don't know yet. Magic is a form of imagination made manifest. There are probably some where wands and spells are how they imagine magic but that isn't the only way."

Matt scoffed, "Are you saying that I can just imagine magic and it will happen. That I can just imagine myself flying hard enough and I can actually fly?"

She smiled, a brilliant grin, "Yes, exactly. That really is all there is to it."

Matt paused, befuddled by her absolute statement. "It can't just be that easy."

"Easy? No.... It is extremely hard. If it was easy then everybody would do it. You need to image in so hard that it defies common sense, that it defies logic, that it defies the natural order of things. You need to imagine it so strongly that it becomes real."

"And you think I can do that? That I can use that to defeat this Night King?" He looked back up at the painting. It seemed impossible to him, how could he possibly do that.

"Yes, it has to be you. There is nobody else that can do it."

"I know there is the painting. But why is it me there? Why not somebody else?"

She smiled again, "Because you are you."

That explanation baffled Matt, how could him being him be the reason.

"I don't totally buy everything, but assuming that is the case. What is it that I need to do to defeat the Night King?"

She smiled radiantly at his tacit agreement. "The first objective is to awaken your latent magic. Everybody has potential for magic, the imagination required. But the spark and the desire are missing from them. Finding the spark and awakening the desire can be challenging. But since you are you we already have the answer to those questions."

She spread out her hands and Matt finally took notice of the other paintings that filled the room. There were big and small paintings. All of them were different. Pictures of fantastical landscapes, futuristic dystopias, battlefields, a desert with a giant worm. They were each as different from one as another, their only thing in common was the paint used to make them.

"This... I don't think this helps me figure out anythi..." Matt began to say before he stopped, looking at the paintings again. Something had struck his memory. His eyes had stopped at a painting of a group of heroes gathered around a fire. They were making merry but there were eyes in the darkness of the forest. One of the groups, a knight perhaps, was turning to face the eyes in the

darkness and was drawing the blade at his waist.

"Oh... you noticed that. I did too. That sword. It is the same one that you are using in the battle against the Night King. And it isn't just that is it..." She said, "You recognize that sword don't you."

Matt's eyes flickered across the different paintings again, this time with new eyes. The backgrounds he didn't recognize at all, and the people depicted in them. In every single painting there were people, people about to engage in some dangerous situation. He was beginning to remember.

He lowered his hand... "No. I don't recognize the sword. I think you have gotten the wrong person." Her plea for aid still hung on his shoulders, but seeing these pictures caused his hands to clench and unclench. Regrets began to boil up from underneath.

Matt turned away from the paintings. He began walking away from those paintings.

The woman watched as he turned. "You are the one we need Matt."

"No... no I am not."

"I'll be waiting for you to return." There was a strange confidence in her voice that he actually would return."

"Who do you think you are to know something like that?" He said. The pain was beginning to get to be too much for him.

"Estefania."

He stopped, almost turning around. It has been the first time he had heard her name. She.... Estefania needed him. Could he really walk away from her. But he did, he did walk away. He was not the person she needed, he was useless. He hadn't been enough, not for his mother, not for the people in those paintings, and certainly he would fail Estefania as well.

The door shut. Leaving Estefania and The Lady alone. Estefania giggled as she floated up into the center of the painting room. "My knight. I found him. Matt.... I've been waiting so long." She floated toward the large painting of Matt facing off against the Night King. She placed her hand on her face, softly, oh so softly. "Nobody can escape their fate Matt, not you, not I, nobody."

The Lady looked up at Estefania. She then looked over at the paintings that

had been put away on the rack in the corner. The Lady didn't say anything, she never said anything. Instead she painted, red was her current color of choice. Lots and lots of red.

Matt had left the manor, past the gnarled roots and overgrown bushes. When he had entered it was guided by the aura of light that Estefania had cast. Now it was dark, only lit by the light from the stars. He passed through the front gate which had been propped open.

He walked down the old road until he hit a bigger street. It was then that he pulled out his phone and called a cab. He waited at the street corner, he had pushed away all thoughts and was just staring up at the moon. It was crescent, waning toward empty. When the taxi arrived he got in and provided directions back to his apartment.

The taxi driver asked questions initially, asking why Matt was out here. But Matt didn't answer and eventually the taxi driver went silent as well. When the taxi arrived at the apartment there was a fire truck outside. He wasn't surprised, it was in the wee hours of the morning but there had been a blown out window, and more.

However despite all that nobody stopped him as he returned to his apartment. Nothing strange happened this time. He wasn't really planning on staying too long either. It would soon be time for him to return to work. He didn't even really feel tired so as he entered his apartment he simply began his normal morning preparation.

Shower, breakfast, clothing. A routine. His suitcase had gone missing sometime during the night. It wasn't really important but missing it caused him to glance around nervously, attempting to locate it but knowing that it would not be there.

His eyes stopped on the closet in the corner of the living room. He practically froze as he stared at it. He stepped one step closer and closer toward the closet. He reached out his hand toward the doorknob. But just before he reached it he stopped. He pulled back his hand.

No, the door needed to remain closed, especially at a time like this. It had

remained closed since he had moved into the apartment which had been years ago. He couldn't open it now... no... he could never open that door again.

He turned and left the apartment, leaving the door behind. It was even earlier than his normal departure but he couldn't remain in that apartment anymore. He glanced around the hallway. There was plastic blocking off the far end where all the drywall had been destroyed. He could not see his suitcase here either.

Matt sighed and took the elevator back downstairs. His car was still in the garage where he had left it. The drive to work was normal. He had to wait a while in the parking lot though, he normally arrived just as the building was opening anyways so arriving even earlier meant that the place wasn't open when he got there.

He was waiting outside the front door when it was opened. The security guard nodded at Matt as he entered the building and headed up to the floor where he worked. He sat down at the computer, turning it on. He knew what he should be doing next but he just stared at the screen.

Last night he had flown through the sky and now he was back at his desk. Estefania had said that she needed him.... Even now he wanted that, wanted to be needed. His job didn't need him, not really. He was just a replaceable cog for them. But Estefania said she needed him, specifically him. But the last time he had been needed.

He opened the accounting document. He focused very hard on the numbers. Focused very hard on work. But in the end it was pointless. He found himself constantly looking away, out the window into the sky. Had he ever looked out that window before now.

But to open that door.... He knew there was nothing actually special behind that door. Just dusty boxes that he had put there when he moved into the apartment. But if he opened that door... could he really manage that?

When the clock hit 5pm he turned off his computer and stood up. He didn't notice the astounded looks that everybody was giving him as he left the office. Slack jawed employees watching something that had never happened before.

He stood outside the office building in the sunlight. He was a bit surprised about that. He didn't know what to do. He could go home but there was nothing

for him there except a closet that filled him with terror. He could go back to the manor with Estefania but that scared him equally as much. He really had nowhere to go.

So he drove his car for a while. Just leaving the downtown and stopping in suburbia. He didn't have anywhere he planned to go, he just got out of his car and walked for a bit. He stopped in front of a store front. A flash of fear passed through him, how had he managed to walk here of all places. He random walking and driving had brought him somewhere not so random. He released a breath, the store was abandoned, the shelves empty, even the sign gone. There was a little bit of sadness though, the shop was gone... along with his childhood.

Memories of children running in and out of these doors flashed through his mind. Just as he was about to put it out of his mind he thought he caught a flash of blue from his peripheral vision. He turned and saw a form disappearing behind a building corner. Only the blue clothing caught Matt's attention.

He mentally debated what to do... surely it was nothing. Just a person wearing normal clothing, right? Yet for some reason Matt followed. As he walked around the corner he once again caught the form of a person in blue going down another street across the road.

He followed the form through alleyways and streets. The person always managing to stay one step ahead of him. Matt arrived at a park, another place uncannily memorable. He could no longer see where the man in blue had gone so Matt just walked through the park. Why had he continued to stay in this area, to follow this person. In the back of his mind he knew, this part of the city was where he had grown up, every shop, house, and street was somewhere he remembered.

This park was just a couple blocks away from his childhood home, where he had lived with his mother and father. He and his mother had moved away after his father died. Even though he had been so worried about opening the closet, he had still managed to end up here. Had he already accepted his choice and was just trying to work through his feelings, he didn't know.

He guessed there was only one place to go now that he was here. He walked through the park. At the back side was a wall of bushes. However he knew there

was more. He pushed past the bushes to reveal an old shed. It looked like nothing had really changed. The place might have once been used for park maintenance but was no longer in use, even after all these years.

He turned as saw them, the blue roses. They were scattered around the edges of the clearing. As kids they had said that those roses kept the adults away. A silly superstition but as kids they had really believed it.

Matt paused... they had really believed it. And the adults did never bother them here. He stared at the roses. Then looked at the shed. It looked exactly the same as the last time he had seen it but that must have been ten years ago.

He stepped forward toward the shed. But as he got near the door he stopped. The door was ajar. It seemed like an impossible coincidence, was somebody else here? No, Matt thought, it must just have been left open. He walked up to door but hesitated. He had avoided the closet, how was this any different. He shook his head and turned, about to leave the area. But then he heard a clatter, like something metal falling to the ground. It was coming from inside the shed.

Was somebody in the shed, it was unlikely but possible. The weeds were thick like nobody had been here in a long time though. Matt had been about to pull away but this peeked his curiosity. He stepped forward pushing the door to the shed open. The door creaked as it was pushed open and Matt stepped inside.

The place was much like you were expect from a shed. Racks for holding tools, Shelves for storage, all empty. The large table taking up most of the room was out of place. A crude wooden table with a hash marked top, like a chessboard but covering the entirety of the table top.

On the far side of the table stood a woman. A dumpy brunette whose hair was tied up in a frazzled bun. She looked as surprised to see Matt as Matt was to see here.

"Who...." She said. Then recognition flashed in her eyes, "Matt?"

Matt recognized her at well. She looked almost the same as the last time he had seen her, although she was quite a bit older and perhaps a bit more frazzled looking. "Mari..." He had practically frozen seeing her. It had been practically a decade since he had last seen her.

There were so many regrets that he didn't know where to begin untangling them. Perhaps it would just be better for him to leave. He was about to turn and do just that when Mari spoke.

"I'm glad to see you again." She smiled. He wouldn't call it radiant or brilliant, but friendly, welcoming. Her words halted him, he had disappeared so suddenly. Could she really forgive him just like this?

"How have you been?"

The question caught him off guard. He didn't have an answer for her. He hadn't been doing well or been doing poorly. He had just been.

Seeing him standing like a deer in the headlights, Mari just continued talking, "I'm surprised to see you here. I don't come here very frequently but you happen to be here one of the times I'm here."

"Oh, yeah.... It was strange, I just happened to be in the area when I saw a person in blue clothing running away from me. I felt it was strange so I followed him. I lost track of him in the park and decided to pay this place a visit on a whim..." He didn't really know what to tell her but it felt like he should say something.

"A man in blue? And they just happened to lead you here. Quite the coincidence." She looked past him toward the hedge. "And it looks like there is more to the story."

Matt furrowed his brow and turned to follow her gaze. It was just the hedge leading back into the park. There was something strange other than the blooming blue flowers and that was something he had expected to be there.

"Have you really forgotten so much?" She asked.

Forgotten... had he forgotten.... He tried to remember. This place, this shed, his friends. He had tried so hard to forget. Now the memories began to return. The blooming blue flowers, it protected them. They only blossomed when they were in danger.

"In danger..." He said almost unconsciously.

"You haven't completely gotten them. Do you know what followed you?"

"Followed me? Nothing was following me. I was following the man in blue." He turned back to her. But she shook her head.

"It won't be the man in blue, after all, the man in blue is you."

"What?"

"If you don't remember then I don't have time to explain. Unlike when we were children the blue flowers won't be able to protect us from something truly malicious." She pointed. Matt turned again, the blue flowers were wilting as he watched, their petals falling to the ground.

She asked him, "Has something happened that made your life less ordinary recently?"

He paused at her words. More flowers fell. "The Night King."

"And what is out there isn't one of yours?"

"What? No...." His words hung in the air, finally he said with a bit more confidence, "No. I think there is some kind of evil cult. I don't really know what they are planning but I know it is bad. I'm apparently supposed to stop the Night King somehow."

Mari smiled a little, "A cult? I love cult story lines."

"You're not surprised, you believe me?"

Her face flattened as she stared him in the eyes, "You really have changed. You really did give up and forgot everything." She smiled again, this time a soft forgiving smile, "Of course I believe you. After everything that happened here, how could I not?"

She stepped forward. She rounded the table, standing next to Matt. "After all, I have not forgotten anything. Now you had better step back and do your best to remember. Hopefully I'll be enough to handle this on my own but do your best to remember."

"Remember what?" Matt called out, his fear beginning to spike. The last of the flowers was falling to the ground.

But Mari didn't answer him. Instead she stepped out of the shed. "If Matt is here then I think I can do it." She reach her hand out to her side. "Holy Knight Zanetha" She shouted. The air swirled around her and almost like ice freezing the area white plates began to form. It moments white metal armor had formed around Mari and in her outstretched hand was a a brilliantly silver sword.

She also looked different. Her brunette bun had turned into long red hair.

However Matt knew this part of her as well. The memories were beginning to come back to him.

Just as the hedge broke apart. What would charitably be called a horde of snakes in the form of a man burst through the remains of the hedge. The man wore a robe like the previous one in Matt's apartment building and out of each of the holes in the robe was a teeming mass of snakes. Fangs rushing in from all sides of Mari.

Her blade cut through them. Each swing glowing with radiant light. As the snakes were chopped apart new snakes came pouring out of the robes. An unending tide of poison tipped fangs. Green and red splattered against Mari's armor.

She shouted back at him, "Stop gawking and remember."

Matt turned his eyes away from the battle and looked down at the table nearby. He remembered them so clearly that it was painful. The six of them sitting around the table. There were little miniatures on the table along with equally small trees and houses. Dice lay scattered around the table. Matt was at the far end of the table, in the far side of the shed. He was grinning as he rolled some of the dice. Everybody else was either wincing in fear or leaning over to see what he rolled.

That is what he remembered but was that the whole truth. He remembered those paintings in the Lady's room. One of them was of the form of the Holy Knight Zanetha. She was fighting against a horde of demons. Monsters from another dimension. But she wasn't alone. Four other heroic figures stood by her side, also fighting the demons.

Matt didn't feel like it was just kids around a table. It had been more, like it had been real. A battle of heroes saving the world. Not just the imagination of children, real magic.

Yet there was Matt. He was not any of those five heroes. One might say that he was the demons, there to kill the heroes. Was he the ancient wizard that had provided them access to this realm. Was he the cowering masses there to be saved by the hero.

Perhaps he was all of them and none of them.

The Guide. The Trickster. The Watcher. Both villain and hero.

The heroes were being pushed back by the large flaming demon. But from behind the demon stood another demon. It brought a knife into the fiery demon's back. It screamed in pain and betrayal. Blue Light flickered in the traitor demon's eyes.

Above all else, beyond all adversity, Matt was on the hero's side.

His eyes refocused, returning to the room in front of him. He looked up to find snake heads covering the ground both inside the shed and outside. The Holy Knight Zanetha was splattered in green and red. Given the carnage you might assume that she was winning however her movements were flagging. Each swing slower than the last.

Whatever monstrous snake thing was under those robes it did not seem to be slowing down. Despite the loss of the snake, even more snakes kept coming from the holes in the robe.

Matt still didn't know what to do but he had some feelings. The board was almost empty. Only Zanetha and the monster stood upon it. But that wasn't enough. The hero was falling, on their last legs.

The Holy Knight Zanetha fell to her knees wheezing. Her vision was blurring, likely from some poison. She struggled back to her feet, raising her sword one more. The snake monster rose up, higher than ever, about to fall upon her and finish her. But then several daggers sprouted from the side of the monster.

Zanetha turned to one side. There was a masked man. He had blue pants and wore a blue sash. A sword hung on his side and in his hands were a set of throwing knives. More knives sunk into the chest robes figure.

"Bluebird." Said Zanetha in relief. Her eyes flicked to the shed, Matt was nowhere to be seen. "About time. Now let's finish this."

The creature turned to face the newcomer. And that was the opening Zanetha needed. She raised her sword up high in the sky. Brilliant white light covered her blade. The monster ran toward Bluebird who drew the sword, a small slim thing compared to Zanetha's weapon. He batted aside the snakes while stepping backward avoiding the monstrosity. Pushed back step by step toward the wall.

Just as Bluebird got pressed up against the wall and all hope seemed lost he

practically disappeared, moving and dodging out of the range of the monstrosity. It turned only to see Zanetha bringing the blade down directly onto its chest. A roar of white flame engulfed the creature, turning it completely into ashes.

Zanetha's sword came clattering down to the ground. She fell down, laying on her back. She looked up at the masked figure whose smirking grin looked down at her.

"Glad you showed up." She said.

"I was in the area, so I thought I would come to the aid."

"Huh... It has been a decade since we last saw each other and you are still as Tsundere as ever."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean." He said. He then turned his head and looked into the shed. "Although, the Watcher needs your help. Even just me was too much for him as he is right now. He has spent too long with his eyes closed that the light blinded him."

Zanetha's groaned, reached out a hand. Bluebird grabbed it and pulled her up to her feet. She hobbled into the shed. There laying on the floor collapsed was Matt. She turned and Bluebird was done. Her own armor dissolving into thin air leaving only Mari behind.

She looked down at Matt, "What have you gotten into?" She looked over the the snake monster's ashes lay. "To think something would be like that. A nightmare? It must be." She mulled over the issue. "It looks like Matt can't afford to forget any longer. I have probably go inform the others. Although..." She sighed, "They have forgotten much too. This is going to be a pain. But... to think that we could all get back together it. That is a dream I had been afraid would never happen."

Chapter 3: A Dream Long Forgotten

Matt roused from a dream. How long had it been since he dreamed? The memories of the dream lingered, sky islands and ships that flew between them. His eyes flickered open. He was laying on grass outside the shed. It was uneven but still comfortable.

He pushed himself up. He remembered Mari and the snake monster but after that... things were a blur of uncertainty. Had those memories that had come to the front of his mind been real?

"You're awake." It was the voice of Mari. She was sitting on the ground not far from him. "Are you feeling alright? You tried to change too much too quickly without a proper vision of things. No wonder you have been out cold for nearly three hours."

"Changed things..."

"Magic is what many people call it. But I think that is a dull way to explain it."

"I did magic? That.... That..."

"Yes indeed." She stood up and brushed the dirt from her clothing. "Not as impressive as you used to be able to do but that isn't very surprising. You haven't been doing it and you are much older now."

Matt's jaw was slack, "I'm still coming to grips with this. I was told that magic is just imagination that you believe in hard enough. Is that really what you did, and me I guess."

Mari nodded, "More or less." She reached out her hand which he accepted and she helped pull him up from the ground, "Magic, miracles, imagination. It is called many things." She pointed across the grass, the snake heads were gone but there were still little patches of red. "It can also be nightmares as well."

"That thing... it was using magic?"

"Yeah, but not the good kind of magic. Imagination is powerful but fear can be even stronger. Terror can consume your imagination and once you believe in that fear enough it can be all consuming. I haven't heard of this Night King before but I can only assume it is some sort of nightmare beast."

"A nightmare... And I'm supposed to fight that?"

"You said that before. Do you think you can tell me what happened to you?" Mari motioned toward the chairs still located in the shed. Matt nodded and followed her into the shed. They sat down and he told her what happened to him.

"Hmm... this Estefania seems sus."

"Sus?"

She shook her head, "You have really lost connection to modern culture haven't you. I'm saying that she is sketchy, something about her, her quest, and meeting you all seem a bit suspicious."

Matt placed his hands together with a thoughtful expression on his face, "Yeah, you are a bit right about that. She seems to know something about me but I know nothing about her. But these Night King seems pretty dangerous and it is already going after me."

"True enough.... But fighting it with a sword? That isn't like you at all. That painting reeks of being weird. Maybe me or one of the others could fight it was a sword but you... straight on? Something about that painting feels like manipulation not actual prophecy. All of the other paintings sounded like descriptions of our adventures, but that one, that one was different."

"Yeah... you're right. All the other paintings depicted the past, but that one was the only one that supposedly depicted the future. And it was also the only one where I was actually depicted."

"Instead very sus."

Matt lowered his hands, he still didn't know what he should be doing.

"Should I help her?"

"Do you want to help her?"

"I... she needs me."

Mari's expression softened looking at his pained face, "Then you should help her. But as you are you still won't be very useful. You need to remember how to use magic."

"How do I do that?"

"Remembering should be easy. Just remember your time with me and the others and that will let you remember how to do magic." She paused and looked over Matt, "and remember who you are. I think you might have forgotten that too."

The Guide. The Trickster. The Watcher. He remembered those names now but he didn't really remember why those were the names.

She took some paper out of the small purse she was carrying. She wrote down

a number on the paper and handed it to Matt. "If you need to contact me you can do it at that number."

"You can't help me remember?"

She smiled, "Imagination is difficult. Too much support and you can become dependent. I have a bunch of things I need to do if there is a nightmare attempting to destroy the city. Once you remember everything we can talk again and I'll explain what I can." She began to leave the shed. She stopped just as she was passed through the doorway. "And Matt, it is good to have you back." Then she was gone.

Matt stood in the shed, "I'm not really certain I am back Mari. Am I really allowed to come back after all this time? Do I deserve to come back?" But she could not hear him, she was already gone. He looked at the table, the nearly forgotten laughter of six children ringing in his head.

When his father died, when Matt and his mother moved, he had left them behind. And he had not kept in touch, so busy he was with college and taking care of his mother. He had put those childish games behind him, although perhaps they were not so childish after all. Now some of those adventures were playing in his mind, he had convinced himself that they were just the imagination of children but after all that had happened to him over the two days he now knew that they must have been true.

He left the shed, attempting to decide where to go next. Should he go back to the manor where Estefania was probably waiting for him. No, he knew where he had to go. There was a closet at his house, one that he hadn't opened in years. He needed to open it, to remember.

The blue flowers on the hedge had returned. He passed through the hedge returning to the park. The place seemed quiet and normal. Too normal for what happened in just behind the hedge. Matt's mind had begun to whirl with questions to which he didn't really have an answer. But he was collecting them.

He walked through the park and back through the streets until he arrived back at his car. The drive back to his apartment was quiet, thoughtful. There was some rising fear as he rode the elevator up to his apartment. The lesser concern was if an agent of the Night King was going to be waiting for him, somehow he

found that less frightening than considering opening that closet.

But he still left the elevator, unlocked the door to his apartment and stepped inside. There was nothing strange inside. No monster there to kill him, so strange floating woman. Just a closet. He stepped toward it hesitantly. He could no longer ignore it. The Night King was after him, he needed to be prepared.

The door creaked open as he pulled the handle. Dust spun around him, a sign that nobody had entered the closet for years. Boxes and boxes were stacked in the small space of the closet. He had packed them all up soon after his father died and they had sat in those boxes since then.

He gulped. He questioned what was actually inside the boxes. His memories told him one thing but he was uncertain how accurate those memories were now. He pulled a box from the top and brushed the dust off the top of it. He fetched a pocket knife to cut the tape from the top of the box. He hand practically shook at the pulled back the top of the box.

There was packing foam and bubble wrap surrounding and concealing the contents. He pulled out the top small piece, and cut the tape keeping the bubble wrap surrounding it. And the wrapping broke apart he could see what was inside.

"It is him." He stared at the tiny miniature in his hand. A small model, delicate and laboriously painted. He had a rapier in his right hand and three throwing knives in his left. A blue mask and a blue cape made his appearance pop. "Bluebird...." Was all Matt could say. He remembered some now.

Bluebird was a master thief, a roguish anti-hero. He was infamous in the city of Lastwater. The heroes chased him down through alleyways only to lose him. Yet that wasn't the end of the story. He joined up with the heroes to help take down the corrupt politician who rules one of the city's districts.

But it wasn't just a miniature, those weren't just stories told by kids. He remembered it vividly. Watching it all happen. This was an icon, a doorway, a symbol. It has been so long, but remembering it caused Matt to crack the barest hint of a smile. A feeling that he had practically forgotten.

He set the miniature of Bluebird aside. Next was a group of skeleton. White bones, bloody weapons. Fought again and again. Servants of a necromancer. A

true villain if ever there was one. The five heroes fought against the necromancer and his terrible army. Matt's part in that entire situation, he grinned remembering it. The necromancer and his hunched assistant were taken out next.

More and more miniatures came out of the box. The painting on some of them was weathered, they had been brought to the shed in a storm. The six kids had huddled around the table, talking and laughing.

The nearby table soon was filled with miniatures from the boxes as Matt unpacked them. Something in Matt's heart felt lighter with each box that he unpacked. The next box was filled with old books and binders full of writing. They had been the inspirations, the doorways, to adventures. Those went on the table as well.

Finally the last box was opened. Inside was another box, this one carved wood. Matt pulled it out gingerly. He unlatched the lid and looked inside. There was the Holy Knight Zanetha, her white armor and flowing red hair. Beside her was Albegor, the Emerald Wizard. Grimkey, the Dragon Slayer. Pilfolia, the Unknowable. And finally Vestonal, the Pirate King.

His friends... at least one aspect of them. Beneath the first layer there were more. Previous characters, adventures after adventures. He had felt terrible keeping this case, keeping this miniatures all these years. But he couldn't bring himself to meetup with his friends again after he had disappeared on them

He carefully lifted the box and placed it on the table in the special place he had designated for it. There were a couple more boxes still left in the closet but those would have to be left to later. They contained no miniatures, no books, but something equally as important, just not right now.

He stared at the piles and piles in front of him. He had been truly surprised how much he had managed to fit in that closet. It had been completely packed with boxes. Now it was practically empty.

Matt felt, relieved, like a weight had been removed from his shoulders. He had dreaded open his closet for years but now that it finally happened he felt happy. Yet, even though everything was out in the open he still hadn't figured out what he needed to do to properly do magic. He also needed a plan.

He lifted up the miniature of Grimkey, the Dragon Slayer. It was his sword

that was depicted in the painting. Matt had been carrying that sword. Still Grimkey's sword was not Matt's to take. And of all the miniatures around the house, the ones in the wooden box were not his to use.

But didn't even know what to do about the sword. Him fighting a monster with a store, that felt wrong. If he was going to help Estefania that did not seem like the way he should do it, but he needed to know more. Was the painting supposed to be prophetic or something else... Matt was too in the dark. He needed to meet back up with Estefania and learning more.

But she was, as Mari said, sus. He needed a second plan of action as well. He brought out Bluebird, making space for him on the table. Next to Bluebird, Matt placed several other minis. Scoundrelly looking folks. The Big Elk gang. The titular Big Elk was nearby but Matt didn't add it to the miniatures he had collected.

Those would be sufficient to do the investigation he needed. At least he thought it would be. Things were different that when he was a child and he didn't know exactly what to do anymore.

The second group he assembled was a group of scary looking monsters. Those got placed on the counter next to the front door. He hoped they would do what he needed them to do and that it wouldn't disturb anybody who lived nearby.

The third group was a task force of knights. Inside the closet was another small box for carry miniatures, so he packed them carefully inside that box. All the remaining miniatures got put back inside the closet. He didn't need the rest yet, this shouldn't hopefully be enough for now.

With all his preparations setup he now just needed to do the magic. Mari had called out the name Zanetha while Estefania simply just did it. Matt breathed in and out, trying to remember. They had all gathered around the table in the shed. Then Matt had brought out the miniatures and placed them on the table.

Perhaps the words were unneeded but Matt remembered them, "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." A belief that these little miniatures were real and that all they were doing was looking into another world. Matt closed his eyes and spoke the

words.

When he opened his eyes things were different. The apartment he had lived in was altered. The veneer of things was the same. A kitchen and big table in the main room but the details were different. Instead of drywall the walls were made of stone, the entirety of the room was larger along with the table. Around the table, seated in the chairs, was a group of scoundrels. They were playing a card game with several coins scattered around the table.

They all, Matt included, turned at the sound of a fearsome howl. A barred and reinforced iron door stood where his closet once was. And the howl had come from beyond it.

A man in with a blue mask looked up from the table, directly up at Matt, "You want to join the game."

Matt was grinning, "While that would be fun, I have a job for you all."

Bluebird grinned back, "We thought you would never ask, ain't that right?"

The huge man, his face full of scars next to to Bluebird nodded, "Damn right. Alright boys, we got a new job. Finish up the game and let's get going."

"Do you know what I need you to do or should I explain it?" Asked Matt.

Bluebird winked, "I got you boss. I've been keeping an eye out on you and figure I have a good idea of what you want. Look into this Estefania dame and find out all her dirty secrets huh?"

"Right. Also if you find anything out about the Night King bring that to me too. Avoid confrontation if you can." The big man harrumphed at that and Matt gave him a side-eye. Buck was the leader of the Big Elks and could be troublesome. He only did things if he agreed with the strategy.

Matt produced a note and handed it to Bluebird. "I will likely be completely out of contact for a while. This is a method to contact Holy Knight Zanetha if you need aid. If I am go for longer than a couple of days then bring the information to her.

Bluebird smirked, "Well, I guess we can work with that straight-edge."

"A holy knight, bah.... We won't need any help like that." Grumbled the big man. "We will give her the information if you go missing but expect us finding you not that useless knight."

Matt grinned a bit at their banter. "See you around."

"Don't take as long this time." Said Bluebird. "Things have been boring without you."

Matt nodded, "Although you will have to explain how that works when I get back. I'm still getting back into this."

"You're the Watcher, I'm pretty sure you know more about it than I do." Said Bluebird shrugging his shoulders. Matt wasn't so sure though. Still, that could be left for later. Not he had to go back and meet Estefania.

Matt kept an eye out for monsters as he left the apartment and took the elevator to his car. Although he guess he had his own monsters now. He wasn't really certain what differentiated the monsters he left back at the apartment from a nightmare. That was still another question he was collecting.

He was glad that he correctly remembered the route back to the mansion. It was out of the way enough that he probably couldn't forget it though. When he drove his car up to the gate the doors swung open and he drove past them. As he parked and got out of the car he could hear a voice calling out to him.

"Matt! You returned!" It was the energetic voice of Estefania as she flew across the yard to greet him. She was waving at him as she got closer and closer. When she arrived she got in and hugged him tightly.

Matt nodded, "Yup, I returned. It took me some time to accept everything but I think I can help you. When you told me about magic it brought back old memories." Matt lifted his small case, "I brought what I need to help. Hopefully the magic will work but I'm optimistic."

She released him, "Optimism is good. Helps you believe in things better. Makes your magic stronger."

"I was also attacked by who I can only assume was a Night King agent. A robed figure but he had snakes for arms, and head. But encountering the creature did help me remember how to properly use magic."

Estefania lead them into the manor while Matt spoke. She nodded, "Yeah, that does sound like an agent of the Night King. I'm so glad you managed to defeat it. Being able to defeat on of its monsters is pretty amazing. Even the weakest monsters that serve the Night King are difficult to fight and they can be

practically unkillable.”

She floated up and down a couple of times, “That is my main problem. I can hurt them but my magic has limited offensive capabilities.”

“Like the metal ball?” Asked Matt.

She grinned, “You remembered that? Yeah, well, it turns out I can make all kinds of heavy objects fly. Then all I need to do is make them no longer fly. Then weight and gravity do the rest. Plus a little flight acceleration before turning off the flight and poof, physics does the rest.”

“Hmm...” Matt thought as they walked toward the room that the Lady had been in. “How broad a capability can people’s magic have? You can fly, but I think my magic is much more broad than that.”

“That is a good question. While not strictly a rule, a person’s magical strength is often inversely proportional to versatile that magic is. I can make things fly, so my power is very strong at doing that since I’m capable of only doing that. The Lady, well, let’s just say her magic is complicated. And your magic is versatile, a form of object summoning from stories. Versatility and unpredictability its own kind of power.”

Matt nodded, not about to correct Estefania about what his magic was actually capable of doing. It was certainly capable of doing object summoning, although what stories was very specific. At least he was mostly sure he could do that. “And you need my versatility?” He asked.

“Right, right, the mission.” She opened the door and they arrived at the room full of the paintings. Some of the paintings had changed. Matt noticed that a lot of the paintings depicting his stories had been swapped out. They were showing destruction of a city.

“These are prophetic futures, you said imagined futures, right? How accurate are they?”

Estefania looked up at the images of a broken city. “It is difficult to quantify. They are plausible futures, ones with enough likelihood that they could be real. From what I can gather from her, she sees all kinds of possible futures, each one at least capable of being the true future. There is one particular problem with the Night King however, these destroyed cities are all of the most likely possible

futures.”

Matt looked at the pictures, there were things he recognized in some of them. Destroyed monuments that were well known about the city. “Every possible future is like that?” He asked.

“Not all of them.” She pointed at the picture of Matt against the Night King. “This one is different. It is a future she found where the Night King does not win. One where he is defeated.”

Matt gulped, “And I’m the one who defeats him. This is the only future where the Night King is stopped?”

Estefania lost her normally cheery look, “There might be others. The Lady can’t exactly control which future she sees. But it is the only one she has been able to find. All I can say is that finding a future where the Night King doesn’t win in is rare, and we need to prevent this future.”

“Will this destroy the world?”

Estefania shrugged her shoulders, “Unfortunately I can’t say on that either way. This city is certainly destroyed and many people last along with it. The world is vast and there are lots of powerful mages, so I doubt it will destroy the world. The Lady’s magic works based off her local as far as I can tell so her magic does not reveal anything beyond this city.”

Matt continued to stare at the strange picture. So much seemed wrong about his depiction in it. He had just begun to remember how his own magic worked but him with that sword just seemed wrong. Not only was he using the sword but he was wearing his work clothing to go along with it. Sure that was what he was wearing right now but it still seemed off. He could probably find some armor or special outfit to wear but he was wearing the white shirt and slacks.

“What do you know about this Night King? It is apparently doing something in the city already since there are at least two different agents of the Night King.”

Estefania lost a little of the sober expression, “Right. I have been looking into it. The Night King is likely an Ancient Nightmare. Basically an old mad mage. Perhaps it was just too hard to kill or maybe even impossible. So it was banished, sort set outside of the world, or at least that is how it is been described. Still it can sometimes communicate with people, and those people can spread that

communication, kinda like an illness.”

“A memetic cult? Does that mean that we can’t really stop it?”

“The Night King has probably been around for ages, so in theory we just need to defeat its prime cultists. The cultists that believe in the being strong enough to properly communicate with it. Stop them and the Night King will no longer be a threat... hopefully for a long time.”

“Wouldn’t that mean I won’t have to actually fight the Night King?”

They looked up at the painting of Matt fighting the Night King. “My hope is that this is just an avatar of the Night King, the desperate attempt of the last cultist to stop you. If that is the case you will be victorious.”

“That sounds like a whole lot of ifs there.” Said Matt skeptically. He wasn’t sure if this sounded like a good plan at all. “Alright, what do you know about these prime cultists? I assume neither of the monsters that I have seen are the prime cultists?”

Estefania nodded, “Correct. I believe there are three prime cultists. The good news is that prime cultists are actually weaker than the monsters, the bad news is they can be a lot more creative and can plan.”

Matt speculated, “They are weaker because they have to actually use magic, not just the monstrous power given to them by the Night King?”

“Spot on. But they will likely be guarded by the monsters as well.”

“Then how can we defeat them. We have you and me. Can The Lady fight as well?”

Estefania shook her head, “No, but it won’t just be the two of us. I have a couple of extras that will join us, but they are subsidiary mages so their capabilities will be limited.”

Matt furrowed his brow, “Subsidiary? They were bought out?”

Estefania laughed, “Kinda correct. Magic is built off imagination. But fully unleashing your own imagination is difficult. It is easier to borrow somebody else’s. It is also easier to believe in since you can already see them do it.”

“So, if you were to fly somebody around they might become a mage that can fly like you?”

Estefania nodded, "Yeah, precisely. It is easier to become a mage by copying somebody else. But it also limits you. It can be hard for them to break free from that idea and add new imagination to it or to become stronger than they think is possible. An original imagination does not have this issue."

"So... you, me, and the Lady are originals?"

"The Lady is actually a divergent, somebody that copied but then broke free from the mold." The Lady looked up from her painting just to nod. "It is hard to do but isn't impossible. That makes her an original for all practical purposes."

Matt thought about it, if he was the original that that would make Mari and the others subsidiaries. Although it had been many years since he had seen Mari, while she had only shown the abilities of a subsidiary in their short encounter it was possible she had changed into a divergent. Matt thought it was even likely given her apparent casualness of encountering magic.

"And our opponents? The cultists?"

"The three prime cultists are certainly an originals but they will have servants that are subsidiaries. The monsters also qualify as subsidiaries since they copy their abilities from the Night King. However stay on your toes, there could be divergents among the servants as well."

"Including among the monsters?"

"Possibly. Those kinds of terrors are far less likely to be a divergent since they have lost most of their intelligence. Still there could be one."

"That sounds like a lot of potential foes. I hope your aid will be up to the task."

She smiled, "With you on the team we are sure to be victorious."

Her certainty in him made him uncomfortable.

Chapter 4: Risen Graves

"Transforming masked warriors?" Asked Matt with a skeptical tone in his voice.

Before him stood four people. Each with colored armor and a mask helmet. The one in red said, "The prismatic light has many powers and we protect the world from evil. No need to be mean about it." He sounded a little bit dejected

however.

Estefania giggled as she floated nearby. She had kept the “magic” of the allies secret until now. Matt didn’t really approve but he understood. She said, “Masks are an extremely common form of magic. Magic has inspirations, pretending to be a fictional character can then turn into being a person like them. Your magic and mine aren’t even that different from theirs. It is just less obvious the inspiration.”

Matt understood. She was right. His magic was based in fiction and stories. And he remembered a story about a flying boy. Perhaps her magic had that kind of origin as well.

“My apologizes then.” Said Matt, “It is just it looks much sill... heroic in person. I was just a little taken back.”

The woman in the group, the one in a yellow outfit, said, “Ah, don’t worry about what our leader says too much. We all know it is kinda silly. But I think that is important. That kind of levity is important to prevent becoming jaded. We have heard stories of people losing their magic, and this is important to combat it.”

Matt glanced over at Estefania, “Losing magic from being jaded? I think I understand a bit.”

Estefania nodded, “Yeah, many children have access to magic even if they don’t realize it. They are also even some of the strongest mages in terms of raw power. However children are also the most fragile. If a mage becomes too disillusioned then they can be crushed by the harshness of the world. Why believe in magic if the world is so cruel? It is a question all mages must answer in some way to retain their magic. Their desire to continue to believe despite the horrors that exist. That is what affected you too right?”

Matt nodded. Those two graves still haunted him, but he felt now that maybe he could move on. “And the costumes, those help you keep that childlike state.” He reached down to the case of miniatures he had brought with him. Perhaps the costumes weren’t that different than him bringing those miniatures, a reminder of the joy that brought him. A memento of happy times.

With the explanation of the costumed warriors explained Matt looked out at

the graveyard just beyond the fence next to them. Rows and rows of graves lay beyond. Gathering next to a normal graveyard might be terrifying enough but this was a military graveyard. Years of soldiers who had fought for the country had been buried here.

"This place. The Night King truly does have no respect for anything." Was all Matt could comment and the costumed warriors around him nodded in agreement. Their outfits even more at odds compared to the grim mood.

"Terror feeds the Night King." Said Estefania who was several feet higher than everybody else and looking out across the graveyard. There was nobody in sight nobody knew how long that would last for. "This place was featured prominently in The Lady's paintings. Death is always strongly connected to nightmares and magic often touches it. Fear and imagination. Two sides of the same coin."

The man in green added, "We have also been keeping an eye on this location at Estefania's request. Plenty of odd people have been coming and leaving, usually at inappropriate times and in large numbers. The cult certainly has agents working in the area."

"Do we know what they are capable of?" Asked Matt.

"If they chose a place like these there could only be one reason."

Matt nodded, "Necromancy." He looked over at Estefania, "Can you explain that. It doesn't sound like necromancy has a lot to do with childlike wonder."

"Wishing hard enough that somebody dead would return to life is a strong feeling. It never works but the more they wish it the more powerful that desire becomes. They learn to rise and command the dead hoping to bring back somebody they care for."

"But the dead are beyond the reach of magic?" Asked Matt.

"Depends on who you ask." She turned away and looked toward the sky. The light was fading. Night was the time for their attack, not because it was too their benefit but because the cultist being here was more likely. "Necromancers claim it works, that they can indeed bring back the dead. Others have made the same claim too...." She trailed off.

"Power over life and death probably does not lead to very stable people

regardless of the true of the claim." Matt finished the implied sentiment. However he kept an eye out of Estefania. While the others might not have noticed her response, Matt knew, there was something about the tone of her voice, her evasiveness, that meant she had direct experience with this. Sus indeed.

Red looked around the group, "Six of us. Plenty of them. But we have goodness and friendship on our side. We can and will win even against insurmountable odds." He looked at Estefania and Matt. "I know what Estefania is capable of but Matt, I want to make sure you have what it takes to handle everything we are about to experience. Do you think you can give us a small show of your magic?"

He knew it was going to happen. He breathed in and out. He closed his eyes and chanted the words, "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." When he opened his eyes he was different. Armed in metal armor with a sword on his hip and a large shield slung across his back. It was the image of the knights that were in the case that had mysteriously vanished. This wasn't exactly what the case, the knights, and everything he brought were all for but the first step.

Red nodded, "A knight. Excellent, with that armor at least you won't be in the way."

Estefania clapped her hands and said, "Amazing Matt, I knew you had it in you." However her eyes were locked on the sword. It was very clearly not the one he was using in the painting. Plus that version of Matt had not worn armor like he was now wearing.

The armor was remarkably light on Matt. He hadn't just brought in the armor. He had also become a knight. A role he had taken before. It asked while working as an accountant he would have said that he didn't know how to use a sword but the hilt of the sword rested easily in his palm as he rested his hand on it.

Red motioned, he was in charge of his group. While Estefania was technically in charge it was Red who was the field commander. Estefania was aerial scouting and emergency aid if needed. Matt joined Red as a vanguard. Yellow, Blue, and Green were behind them. The four colored warriors appeared unarmed but Matt

had a sneaking suspicion that it was not exactly true. They had something that looked like a gun on their waists.

Red lead them through the gates of the graveyard. "That mausoleum" He said and pointed, "We suspect that is where they gather. According to plans for the place it isn't supposed to have any underground area but magic has the habit of adding areas to places."

Matt already understood that part. He had changed his apartment and at this point he felt like the secret hedge and shed were probably not marked on any map of the park.

As they approached the half way mark on the way to the mausoleum sounds began to erupt from all around them. As if on cue, rotting corpses began to pull themselves from the ground. Matt eyes them as he drew his sword. "Zombies."

It was all he needed to say and all that he was given opportunity to say. Soon the zombies were rushing in. Shambling rotting claws of hands were met with fists and a sword. The zombies were not your slow unthinking breed either. These ones were fast. They also seemed to retain some spark of combat technique that might have been held by the soldiers they once were.

Matt fought off the zombies easily enough. A sharp sword could cut them down one after another as they attacked him. But he was just a skilled man with a sharp sword. Compared to the colored warriors his abilities were practically comical. They moved much faster than him and their unarmed strike blew holes in the bodies of the zombies.

They practically left a field of carnage and destroyed zombie bodies behind them. After the first few zombies that Matt cut through he didn't have to do any more work. They were so efficient at destroying the undead that Matt almost put away his sword and just let them handle it. He just kept his weapon at the ready, only attacking those few zombies that got close to him.

Estefania was simply floating over everything giggling to herself while she watched Matt. She was supposed to be keeping an eye out but instead she was just watching him. Matt just made sure to keep up with the others and take down any of the zombies that managed to make it to him. He had ideas about how to

improve his own speed but he instead just left it to the others.

As they got close to the mausoleum even more undead began to crawl out of the ground. Matt was a bit skeptical that there were actually enough corpses here to have produced this many zombies. Then in pure violation of what was actually buried underground the zombies began to rise with weapons. And not just any weapons, real modern military weapons. Zombies with guns and rifles were suddenly much more scary than unarmed zombies.

They were good shots too. Both Green and Yellow had both already taken hits. Their colored outfits were protected like bulletproof armor but the impacts of the bullets still affected them. Between the increased numbers of zombies and their new and improved weaponry it was harder for the warriors to keep up.

They were still moving from one zombie to another killing each instantly. But they had to dodge backward and forward, keeping out of the line of fire of the zombies with guns. Matt had already secretly called upon his magic. The knight's armor he wore had changed slightly in visuals, runes appearing on the edges of the armor. Then the bullets came his way the bullets clattered off the armor to no effect.

Armor designed to take the full force blows from monsters didn't even buckle under gunfire. Matt now had a job to do. Only a small handful of the zombies actually had guns and Matt was the one who charged those zombies. There bullets rung off his armor as he got in close. The sound was painful but nothing compared to getting shot with a bullet.

After Matt had cut down nearly two dozen zombies with guns the air began quiet. Finally they stood around the strewn bodies of countless zombies. They were all panting for air. The armor that had felt so light to Matt at the beginning of the encounter now felt heavy and uncomfortable.

Even though he couldn't see their faces under their full masks the warriors also seemed quite tired. The only one who seemed relaxed was Estefania. She had joined the battle against the gun wielding zombies like Matt, dropping objects on them from high above. There were zombies impaled by metal nails that had been dropped from excessive altitude.

Red clapped Matt on the back, "You did good. I was worried to begin with

but once those guns started firing that armor really proved its worth." Matt couldn't see the man grinning but could absolutely tell that Red was. "We should see how well your armor can take a hit from my fist."

"I'm pretty sure your fists pack more firepower than one of those zombie guns. You were practically detonating their chests with your punches. My armor might be tough but I don't know if it can take that much punishment."

Red eyed Matt's armor which didn't show even a scratch from the barrage he had received several times. "I think you are being too modest. Against 'normal' bullets our armor would have withstood it just fine. Those zombies were definitely shooting magically enhanced bullets. Of course against magics everything is magically enhanced."

Matt shrugged, "Perhaps. I haven't been shot with a real bullet so I don't think I could compare."

Estefania drifted down from her vantage. "Real is kinda relative. Bullets from summoned monsters often function using imagination logic. Their effectiveness is based off the belief. So believe that the bullets would effect the warriors made their armor less efficient. While their armor is believed to withstand bullets, which works great against normal guns. But magic against magic is much more complicated. It is more about belief than anything physical."

Red had an annoyed tone, "Are you saying we don't have enough faith in our abilities which is why it worked against us?"

She grinned and giggled, "Perhaps. But I think more important is why you believe your armor protects you from gunfire? Answer that question and your armor will be even more effective." She floated off, not letting Red even attempt to dispute the statement.

He kicked on rock on the ground. It went off until it hit the corpse of a zombie. "I hate to admit that she is right. When the Professor was around we were stronger, but now we have trouble against some zombies with guns."

"The Professor?" Asked Matt.

Red nodded, "He made our suits and recruited each of us."

Matt understood from just that explanation, that meant that the Professor was the original. Something must have happened to the Professor leaving these

warriors without his guidance. If they didn't 'know' what their suits were made of how could they properly believe that the suits would protect them from gunfire.

Matt looked up at Estefania before saying, "I don't have any words of advice on how to improve your strength. I've just been rediscovering my own powers. For many years I had been overcome with uncertainty and despair. I had practically forgotten about my own magic. All I can say is to not give up."

Under his mask the man laughed, "The professor said that to. As long as we never give up then evil will eventually be defeated." He paused, "It has been hard at times but we have to keep believing in those words. Without that hope." The mausoleum seemed to loom above them in the rising darkness. They both knew that their current job was important and they could not fail.

Matt had only known Red for a brief moment in time but he could already tell that Red was more trustworthy than Estefania. She had something that she wasn't telling them. Something important. Matt was going to learn what it was, just right now they had a job to do.

They reached the top of the hill where they stood in front of the mausoleum. No more zombies had attacked them. Whoever was inside must have realized that it wouldn't be enough. But it also meant that whoever was in there knew they were here and was preparing to engage them.

Estefania drifted down to be on level with them. "I don't see anybody else around. But any later than this and I won't be able to see anybody at all." Night had almost truly fallen. The last rays of the sun were dipping beneath the horizon.

Red, Yellow, Blue, and Green gathered next to the door to the mausoleum with Matt being rear guard. Red kicked the stone door and it shattered open. They stormed into the mausoleum. However only a few steps into the place they stopped. In defiance of the outward appearance the inside of the mausoleum was large and grand. Much larger and grander than was possible.

A vast arched ceiling. Coffins placed in fall nooks. Urns of ashes and an ominous large statue of the grim reaper looking over everything. And the place was quiet. Nobody was there. But there was a candle lit stairway down into the

earth. The same black candles were scattered all around the room, illuminating the location with flickering shadows.

"Yeah, definitely waiting for us. And damn, this guy has got some style." Said Matt as he stared at the proceedings. "I feel like a vampire is just waiting for us at the bottom of those stairs."

Yellow shivered before she said, "Don't tempt it. I think our opponent really could be a vampire."

Estefania drifted in behind them. "It is possible. We weren't able to find out too much about the cultist that is here. An emaciated man with thin pale skin. That could be a vampire." She raised up her hands to mime having fangs.

"A mage with vampire powers would also inherit the weaknesses of vampires correct?" Asked Matt.

Estefania nodded, "More than likely. But limitations add to the power of imagination. It makes the imagination more believable. Vampires have a lot of weaknesses which also makes them very powerful. Or so I hear, I have never encountered a vampire personally."

"Please... stop suggesting it is vampires. You are cursing it." Said Yellow. She was clearly worried, glancing around cautiously. It was more believable had she not just recently bashed her way through a horde of zombies with the rest of them.

Matt's case had reappeared and he set it outside the door to the mausoleum. Then he pushed back the broken door to the mausoleum as carefully as he could, leaving the case just outside.

"What is that for?" Asked Blue.

"Magic protection. It will prevent them from sending anybody else after us. Or at least if they do I will know before we get ambushed from behind."

"A trap or something?"

"Pretty much. But I don't want to explain too much in case our enemies are listening in." Blue looked back at the staircase down into the darkness then he nodded.

Matt whispered the words again, "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." He was

getting used to the feeling. When he opened his eyes nothing had apparently changed but he knew that it had been done.

He turned back the others who were all waiting for him. "Alright then, let's go down into the obvious trap."

"Worry more about the non-obvious traps" Said Blue. He patted the gun-like objects at his waist. They had still not used them and Matt still wasn't sure what they were for, "The obvious trap will be easy to deal with, but I expect this opponent to have multiple layers of traps."

Matt didn't respond but he agreed. There was likely going to be three layers of traps. The obvious trap, the not-obvious trap, and the truly hidden trap. If he was setting traps, and he was already beginning to do that, that is how he would do it.

They began the walk down the poorly lit stairway down into the darkness of the underground that was not supposed to exist. It was minutes after they had disappeared from the mausoleum entrance room that the rattling started. The various coffins began to rattle and shake. Then skeletons began to pull themselves out of the cubbies and alcoves of the room.

The skeletons gathered at the top of the staircase. All of those down in the darkness still unaware of the force that was building up behind them.

Far down the stairs Matt was carrying a lantern. The light from the candles was enough to barely see by but they weren't about to have the only source of light be the lights of the enemy. Between the light of the lantern and the glow emanating from Estefania they could see pretty well in the staircase. But still the staircase continued down and down.

"How deep does this thing go?" Asked Yellow.

They had been walking down the stairs for what felt like ages. But it just kept going down into the dark. Estefania had practically lost focus and was floating down backward while staring up at the ceiling.

Green shook his head, "This seems like an insult to masons. Why bother making cool massive structures when magic can just do it instead. It seems a bit cruel to them."

Green's muttering caused Yellow to call out, "Be quiet. I think I see the bottom." They all squinted in the gloom to see if she was correct. They slowed as they all confirmed that it was indeed the bottom.

Stepping down the last step left them in a crypt. Rather than the majestic horror of the mausoleum this place was cramped terror. The shuffling and clacking of bones could be heard out in the darkness. The dead were here and active, everybody could feel it.

Matt shone his light down the tunnels but none of the undead could be seen. They were lurking just beyond sight. The path split into different directions. No matter what they chose there was risk of the undead coming in from behind them.

"Any ideas?" Asked Red to the group.

Blue looked out down the corridors. "The necromancer is down here somewhere. If we knew which hallway we could try and collapse the others. That would help prevent us from being overwhelmed."

Everybody's eyes went between each other trying to figure out a good plan. Eventually all their eyes settled on Matt. "Why are you all staring at me?" He asked.

"Because you are awesome." Said Estafania. "Also you had the look in your eyes like you have an idea but are just trying to figure out all the details."

"Fine. I suppose I do have the beginnings of a plan. You can handle destroying the other routes if I can figure out which route to go correct?"

Red nodded, "Yeah, we could do that. What do you have for figuring out the right way?"

Matt had brought the knights but he had already brought a few other miniatures. He closed his eyes and whispered "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence."

When he opened his eyes he heard Estafania gasp out, "Oh doggy!" She had already zoomed in to begin giving the big droopy dog a bunch of pets and scratches. The dog seemed to accept the pets.

The others seemed drawn to the dog as well but they had the restraint not to attempt to pet the dog in the middle of an underground dungeon full of undead.

Matt cleared his throat, a couple of times. This eventually got Estafania to release the dog. "Alright. This dog is going to decide which way people went using smell. Hopefully he will be able to properly determine which route the living cultists went most recently. This will let us find their location."

Matt looked down at the dog and said, "You hear that? I want you find living people. The more recent the passage the better." The dog placed his nose down to the ground and began sniffing around. He clearly did not like what he was smelling but the dog kept working. After a few sniffs in each direction the dog stopped on the right side path.

Matt reached down toward the dog and scratched him behind the ear. "You heard the dog. This is our route. Destroy the other paths."

"Roger." Said Red who crashed his fists together. He simply punched the wall. That was enough to cause terrible cracks to appear in the wall. After a couple of additional hits the ceiling began to give way. Matt might have had trouble getting out of the way of the collapsing ceiling but Red didn't seem to have any such trouble. Dodging as the stone collapsed.

The other passageway was being collapsed just as quickly by Green. Well, maybe not quite as quickly but quick enough that Matt felt it was plenty fast. He was almost worried that the whole passageway would come crashing down around them. But that did not happen.

There was now thick rubble down each of the other two passageways. The undead wouldn't be able to use those routes without some additional excavation. Then they took the only other path left to them. The dog followed along side with Estefania right next to him, she was making sure he was well taken care of.

The group passed through a couple of burial looking rooms. There were undead here and there during the travel but disposing of a couple of extra undead was easy for the group. The dog was on high alert but did not join in any of the combats. There were a couple of extra split passageways that he was able to aid with. Those extra passageways were destroyed as well.

They could hear the clatter of more undead ahead of them. More, much more than they had encountered up until now. "Looks like the necromancer has gathered his soldiers. We had better get ready." Said Blue.

Grim nodded were shared by everybody but Estefania who seemed far too cheerful. She also chimed in, "Matt, you and me are in reserve. We are the ones who need to go after the necromancer and if there is a monstrous cultist we will likely also need to deal with that."

Her faith in his abilities might be beyond his capability. In many ways Red was superior to Matt. Against the Necromancer, Red was probably going to be a stronger asset. It was the regenerating monster that Matt was the most prepared to deal with.

"I'm ready." Said Matt with a nod.

They stepped forward. The last room was a dark crypt. It was a larger room, barely large enough to fit the horde of undead in it. The room was practically packed to the brim with undead. At the far end was a massive coffin. Rather than being used for burial the coffin was stained with blood, like it had been used as a sacrificial altar. Around the coffin were three men in robes. One had gold trim while the other two were plain.

The three necromancers were behind a whole horde of undead. The leader of the three yelled out a cross the crowd so that everybody could hear him. Although he need not have yelled. Beyond his voice the place was bone quiet.

"You are the ones who oppose the master's return. How foolish. His return will be strength to a weak world, a salve for the foolishness of the modern era. Lay down your weapons and Surrender. Those that do we will let you pass away peacefully rather than screaming in pain."

It was Red that yelled out, "You had better work on your pitch! Surrender and die is not a very compelling argument. And your master is an asshole!" His shouts caused the necromancer to scream back.

"You fool. Very well, die!" He pointed toward them. And then the horde advanced.

Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow smashed into them with the weight of the tide. The undead were scattered like flies before them. As the zombies fell before them the necromancer was the one surprised. "How do you still fight with such strength. The fear of my master should have weakened you!"

Matt scoffed at this. "You think we didn't already notice that." He raised the

lantern he was carrying. "This lantern has long since dispelled your curse." It was glowing white, brighter than normal flame. Matt had brought it out when going down the stairs but it had been something he had planned from even before that.

Normally Matt would have kept this detail to himself but this was plan. And the Necromancer acted exactly like Matt wanted him to act. The Necromancer pointed at Matt and now everything in the room was prioritizing going after him. More importantly one of the secondary necromancers began running toward him.

That necromancer began growing in size. The robe was bursting open and hair was beginning to spill out of the breaks in the robe. Calling it a werewolf would be an insults to both werewolves and wolves. Instead he was just a big hairy monstrosity. The limbs were elongated, stretching in horrible ways as he ran toward Matt.

"Get out of the way." Called Matt, "This one is for me and Estefania to deal with." The colored warriors happily got out of the way of the beast." Matt latched the lantern to his waist and unslung the shield that was on his back.

The beast came crashing into him. He braced himself and only slide back a foot under the strength of the monster. He could feel the creak of his shield and the pain in his limbs but he managed to withstand the assault.

Estefania had already gone into action. She was near the ceiling and threw a very heavy looking metal orb down at the beast. The creature crashed into the floor with cracking and breaking limbs from the heavy. Matt wondered how much that orb actually weighed. Yet that was not enough to deal with the beast.

The regeneration was expected. The monstrous flesh began to warp and reform. The broken bones creaking and rejoining where they had broken. The orb fell out of the creature and the wound caused was already beginning to close up.

But Matt reached down toward the lantern and lifted it off his belt. He chucked the lantern into the air at the beast and then sliced it with his sword. The white light cut and the strange oil spread across the monster. The monster howled in pain and lit aflame from the lantern oil. And the lantern oil burned,

white hot and terrible. The scorching flesh smell was terrible but the beast's regeneration could not seem to keep up with the burning flame.

The necromancer looked furious but then his face changed, "You may have beaten one of the lord's servants but you wasted your protection against my curse. Now the others will fall." He cackled but then that cackle died in his throat. Red and the others were still plowing through the undead with no curse seeming to effect them.

"Impossible. But no matter. These undead are just the beginning. My reinforcements will soon arrive." He looked eagerly toward the door everybody had come through. He was expecting a new horde of undead to break through and finally overwhelm them. But nobody come.

"But my reinforcements. What happened to them? Tell me!" The necromancer screamed at Matt. But Matt did not respond. He had no further need to trick the necromancers. Matt just began walking toward the necromancer, slowly.

Each step brought himself closer and closer. The undead between the two of them had been dealt with by the the warriors who were now mopping up the remaining undead. So nobody was there to stop Matt as he walked up the three stairs to stand next to the coffin with the Necromancer.

"No matter. I will kill you myself." He yelled and black magic began to coalesce at his fingertips. When an orb came flying through the air, breaking his fingers he screaming his pain. It had been thrown by Estefania who was floating just behind Matt.

Matt looked down at the blood-soaked coffin. Then he raised his sword and brought it down on the necromancer. The robed figure fell and blood began spreading from the corpse. Matt turned to look at the third frightened necromancer who was taking step by step backward.

"That is a problem with Necromancers. They have strong magic but without their army they are nothing special. Now tell me. Do you want to talk or do you want to die along with him."

The apprentice necromancer gulped slowly before raising his hands. "I surrender. Please have mercy." Matt nodded and sheathed his sword.

Chapter 5: Illusion of Choice

Matt left the questioning of the cultist to Green who had a good investigative mind and enough deception to be effective. Matt kinda liked the guy but thought that Green was probably the most dangerous member of the group just for this reason.

Instead he was standing next to Red and Estefania. Red clapped Matt upon the shoulder, "You did well there. The two of you were quite the room." Estefania smiled and floated upside down in happiness from the praise. "That Necromancer seemed pretty upset that you managed to counter his curse. I'm also still not certain what you did either, was it not the lantern."

Matt pointed at the dog that was getting pet by Yellow. "Actually he was the one that protected everybody from the curse. But I needed to make sure the Necromancer didn't know that."

Red laughed a strong belly laugh at that. "The dog, huh. Well I didn't see that coming either. Since the dog was also needed to locate the necromancer he must have never thought there was another reason to the summoning. Pretty smart. The necromancer also seemed to think he would get reinforcements. Maybe he didn't expect us to destroy all the passageways."

Matt shrugged, "Poor planning on his part. The monstrosity also was defeated much easier than I thought. While the fire was supposed to stop the regeneration I didn't expect that to just defeat it." He looked over at Estefania, "Was that normal?"

She frowned for a moment, "Maybe a bit strange. The agents that have gone after me in the past were stronger than that. This one seems rather... weak?" She spun in the air during her contemplation. "Or maybe you are just that strong Matt!"

"I doubt it. However this can't be the full extent of the cult's strength. They wouldn't be a risk for destroying the city if they were this easily defeated."

Blue had been examining the room but had rejoined them. "It is likely the necromancer is their weakest cult leader. Well, weakest is probably the wrong description. I would say that he was the worse suited to stopping a raid from other mages."

Matt nodded in understanding, "He had the strength of numbers. If you want to destroy a city somebody like the necromancer is important. A horde of undead might be weak individually but the area of coverage will be much greater."

Blue pointing at Matt, "Precisely. Important but ultimately replaceable." He looked over at Estefania, "What else can you share about the other two leaders? They will both be more crucial to the completion of the plan than this one was."

"Hmm..." She continued to spin, "Let us see what the apprentice has to say before I share anything about the next leader. Maybe he will have something useful to share."

They waited while Green finished the interrogation. After not too long Green stepped away from the clearly drained and terrified apprentice necromancer. They all gathered in the corner while the dog watched over the necromancer.

"So, what did you learn?" Asked Red.

"There is the stuff we already knew or suspected. The necromancer was building an army of undead. They were also kidnapping and sacrificing people. A bunch of the kidnapped victims were actually sent off to the other cultists as sacrifices to the Night King." They nodded.

Green continued, "While the apprentice doesn't know too much about the overall plan he did know some about the other two cultist leaders. They were present in some of the logistical meetings that the various apprentices had to deal with. I don't think the apprentice had anything really useful to say about the big bad leader, just that he was hella scary. But the other leader is what is important."

He milked everybody's rapped attention for a moment before he finally said, "The other leader is Doctor Amandeep." There was several gasps from some of the warriors.

"Who?" Asked Matt.

"You don't know Doctor Amandeep?" Said Yellow incredulously. "He is a television doctor who cures all kinds of strange ailments with the powers of crystals. Everybody, or at least me, thinks he is a total fraud but he somehow manages to keep staying on air. I'm not sure if it is validating that he might actually be using magic or if that means he was actually real this whole time."

"A television host?" Asked Matt. He glanced over at Estefania, "Does that

somehow make his magic stronger or something?"

"That is a complicated question. Magic usually avoids media broadcasting in any form. Sharing your magic too broadly can end up with disbelief souring your magic. The other side of the coin is you can gather the faith from people watching and believing. It can be a pretty tricky line to walk where your magic power fluctuates randomly."

"Hmm..." Pondered Matt, "Then I guess the question is whether he is using his television presence to gather magic or if there is some other purpose. Do you know where he is located?"

"That part is easy." Said Yellow. "He has his own studio and everything. The place is well know and people come visit it a lot. I think it even has a 'gift shop' full of all the 'totally legitimate' products that he sells on the show."

"Sounds like he is a big deal. Perhaps big enough of a deal that he is drawing magic from it." Said Matt.

"Totally a big deal." Said Yellow with a nod. "Big enough that stopping him is going to be a big issue. In terms of money he has plenty of it. It is possible that money is the whole reason a mage like him turned to television. A little magic and television can be very lucrative, if risky like Estefania said. We will have to have a plan for how to deal with him."

"Have you got any plans Estefania?" Asked Matt.

"I already knew that the cultists had a high profile television channel on their payroll, until now Doctor Amandeep was just one of three possibilities. Now that we have definitively figured out which one I can cancel the plans to investigate all three of them and then expedite the plan to deal with the cult." She spun around so that she was facing update and tapped her finger on her chin.

"Alright, give me two days and we can handle it. Everybody meetup at the manor then."

The all nodded in agreement. Red took over keeping the apprentice prisoner and they left the crypts under the mausoleum.

As Matt walked through the graveyard his armor dissolved into the air. He watched the warriors go off in a different direction and Estefania fly off toward the manor. He was left alone for the first time in a while.

From a concealed position came a man in armor much like the one that Matt has been wearing. He saluted Matt as he got close. Matt asked, "Was there any issues?"

He shook his head, "Me and the other knights managed to deal with all the extra undead. They did indeed come from the mausoleum and the graveyard like you expected. They gathered slow enough that we were able to deal with them without any issues."

"Good." Said Matt with a nod. "Your service was appreciated. Anything unusual you noticed?"

The man shook his head. Matt then continued, "Thanks." The knight nodded before he dissolved into light. The dog disappeared along with him.

Matt breathed a sign of relief. His extra plans had worked correctly. You never could tell if your plans would be successful when interacting with an enemy. The necromancer could have had some contingencies that Matt hadn't anticipated. Luckily for Matt that hadn't been the case this time. But if his next opponent was a television host there were much more things that could go wrong. So many things, and he didn't have much time to prepare.

He arrived home and stopped in surprise as he opened the door. While he wasn't surprised that Bluebird or Buck there, he was surprised to find Mari hanging out with them. She had been dealt into the card game. She also seemed to be winning.

"And what is happening here?" Asked Matt.

"Poker, can't you tell?" Said Buck with a blank stare. Like he thought that was actually the question that Matt was asking.

"I'm asking what she is doing here?" He pointed at Mari.

"You said to contact her if we had problems." He shrugged. "Your local magic was pretty confusing to me. Bluebird too but he won't admit it. So we recruited her to help us with figuring things out."

Mari looked smug. She spoke up, "Also you didn't leave them with any modern money or your number. They basically had no option other than to reach out to me or wait for you to return. You really only have yourself to blame."

Matt sighed, she did actually have a point there. He hadn't explained much to either of them and left them with just the clothes on their back to help handle his situation. Sure they probably had gold coins or something but that would hardly be of use in modern society. "Fine. At least tell me you're learning something while I was gone."

"We did indeed." Said Mari as she won another hand. The cards were then quickly put away. "Bluebird, do you want to explain or should I?"

"You did it Lady Zanetha. You are more familiar with the local vernacular."

"Alright. We looked into this Estefania and The Lady. While I hadn't heard of her before, I do know some other local magical folks so I approached them for some discrete questions. While she had practically disappeared recently this 'The Lady' is known among the locals."

Mari continued, "She was the assistant / trainee of a pretty well known mage. But when that mage met an unfortunate accident she was left to fend for herself. Apparently she bounced around for a while aiding different groups with magical fortune telling before she finally disappeared around a year ago. People kinda assume she died, an unfortunately common occurrence for mages."

"And Estefania?" Asked Matt.

"Zip. Nada. Nothing. At least until three or four months ago. She seemed to show up out of nowhere with the missing The Lady. They have been gathering some allies for some magical something or other but nobody seems to know the details. She got a group of pretty skilled local warrior mages but since joining her they have also been pretty scarce."

"Would those have happened to be named Red, Green, Yellow, and Blue?"

She nodded, "I see you became acquainted with them as well. Anything else you can share from your expedition?"

Matt had sat in one of the free chairs while Mari had been talking "We dealt with a local necromancer. And apparently a local television personality named Doctor Amandeep is involved in the cult as well. Estefania is working on the plan for dealing with him."

"Doctor Amandeep? Huh.... I guess it makes sense that he is a mage, but one of the cultists? Publicity like that can be hard for keeping a consistent level of

magic.”

“That is what Estefania said was well. Did you find out anything at all about Estefania?”

“From the stories she is strong. Like freaky strong. Magic so strong you can see it strong.”

“She does literally glow. I didn’t put too much thought into that since she able to fly.”

“Yeah, but just able to fly seems to be an understatement. Tell me what you have seen her do?”

Matt explained the different things he had seen her do. As he finished Mari nodded, “Yeah that is pretty strong. True unlimited hovering flight like hers is very unusual. Not too strange by itself but being able to also lift others and extremely heavy objects. That is a very strong level of magic.”

“Compared to the colored warriors she does have quite the strength. Although maybe I don’t have good context. I can only really compare her to them and me.”

Mari sighed, “You are also not the best comparison. Your magic is also very strong. Although magic is extremely hard to quantify what qualifies are strong. There are just some many variables related to magic that knowing who is the strongest is quite hard. But Estefania and you both have high world imagination influence.”

“Uh... what?”

“Kinda a rough estimate of how much the magic changes the world around you. It is the easiest magical metric to measure, good mages can just kinda feel it. Not strictly a measure of a mages ‘power’ per se but more a scale of how grand the effects can be.”

“So the necromancer would have been highly ranked here too?” Asked Matt.

“Well, moderately high at least. Some mages put a lot of stock in this kind of power. The bomb equivalent of magic. Often you can’t really change your ranking here since it is tightly connected to your type of magic.”

“And people don’t change their type of magic?”

"It is very rare. People who experience life changing events can completely change their style of magic but barring that changes are usually slow and progressive as you change slightly over time."

"Right... so Estefania is high world imagination influence and people are worried about her because of that."

"Particularly. That can be dangerous but she is also very precise. The type of precision that you normally only see on older mages. The kind that you get from ages of practice."

"So?"

"From your description of her personality, her raw power, and per precision. I would peg her as a child soldiers mage." Matt raised his eyebrow at that. Mari explained, "Somebody who are raised specifically to be a powerful mage. Not only is it hard to do, it is also extremely abusive."

Matt nodded, "Ah, I see. You need to both make them learn and use magic young but you need to show them the cruel reality of the world while keeping them functioning mages."

"Very frowned upon. My sources say that is had a low success rate too. Most of the time you just end up with a traumatized child, although I've only heard stories about it. Children of mages usually end up as subsidiaries which is a much kinder way to raise them than trying this."

Matt scratched his chin, "You think she might have been the child of one of the Night King cultists?"

Mari shrugged. "Seems plausible. It would explain how she appeared out of nowhere and how she learning about them." Mari stood up. "Alright boys. We need to look into some more things. See if we can find out anything about Doctor Amandeep before Matt heads off to fight him."

"Your still in on this?" Asked Matt. Bluebird and Buck, along with the rest of the gang, were standing up to join her.

"Yup, apparently the city is at risk and I can't just leave you to it alone. Now take your rest while we go out and information gather for you. You will have an evil television mogul to deal with soon enough."

Matt let them leave. Once they were gone Matt pondered a little. "Hmm..."

that still seems wrong. If she was a member of the cult wouldn't the necromancer have know her. Also why does she seem to know me. That is something I still don't have an answer to." He was still missing some things and didn't know what to do about it. He would need to have some kind of plan.

"Tell me again what the plan was." Said Matt exasperated.

"What? Is there something wrong with the plan?" Asked Estefania with an innocent tone.

"I think you suggested that I would infiltrate the tv show as a guest then kidnap him during a television broadcast. But that can't be right because that is insane."

"We need to ensure that we have a chance to deal with him. During one of his shows is the best chance. Once you are near him you activate your magic and bring him to another world. The rest of us will already be there waiting for him."

Matt ground his teeth, "Ok, sure... that might work. But it is also risky. If he catches onto it I'll be alone in enemy territory. And bringing people into another world isn't as easy as you think it might be."

"No?" She sounded so innocent. Like she really thought it was easy.

Matt eyed her. He knew he was capable of doing it, but he didn't know how she knew. So far he had only summoned things, not brought anybody into one of the alternate worlds. He still was mostly uncertain how that all worked yet.

"I can do it. But what if Doctor Amandeep catches onto the plan? Bringing somebody against their will is a tricky endeavor. You have seen my ritual right? I would need to do something similar, with him within five feet of me. And he needs to stay that close and not interrupt me for the full time."

"I believe in you."

Matt sighed, "Fine, fine. How are you planning to get me onto his show? I'm not exactly somebody well known."

She produced a fancy looking letter, one with gold trim and everything. Matt looked at it skeptically. "And that is?"

"An invitation to a special game show that Doctor Amandeep is hosting."

"A game show? Isn't he supposed to be a doctor?"

The warriors were there too. It was Yellow who responded, "Doctor, yeah. This is probably one of his 'health challenges' where normal people are brought in to be under his supervision for a few weeks while he gives them some miracle treatment."

"Oh boy..." Matt looked down, "Now I'm even more worried. Fine. Tell me about it."

Matt listened in horror as they explained how the 'Game Show' would work. Matt watched practically no television and was surprised to hear how modern reality television worked and what they could get away with.

"Alright then. If this is the plan I'm going to have to bring you all to the other world first. Gather around, you all need to be close to me." They gathered around him. "Now you all need to close your eyes." All was quiet as they closed their eyes and Matt chanted the worlds.

When they opened their eyes they were somewhere else.

Everything was metal and chrome. Well appointed chairs and couches displayed the room as a place of relaxation. And against one wall was a glass window. Beyond it was glistening lights, stars.

Blue looked out the window uncertainly, "Uhh.. where are we? I was expecting someplace quite different than this."

"Space Station Vanguard Nine. You can make yourself at home wherever you want. But I recommend not straying too far from this room."

Blue looked nervously around. "Space... why shouldn't we stray too far from this room."

"Because this space station is abandoned. The crew mysteriously disappeared."

Everybody stepped backward in fear. "Wait... there aren't evil aliens here?"

Matt shrugged, "Who knows. But mostly you should stay here because I don't have any way of easily informing you when I'm going to bring Doctor Amandeep here. So we should show up basically at any time." Matt pointed, "There are some rooms over there if you need to sleep and food is in the kitchen over there." He pointed to another room.

"While I'm sure you would like to explore, leave that to after I deal with

Amandeep.”

Blue seemed to realize something... “What happens to us if you fail and die?”

“You get to survive the destruction of the city. Lucky you.”

Blue gulped, realizing what that meant for them.

“Well, have fun. I think there are some games in the shelves there if you need something to do. It might be several days before I find a good opportunity to kidnap him so try to stay alert for whenever that happens.” Matt closed his eyes and before anybody else could complain he disappeared, leaving them on an abandoned space station.

Blue looked around terrified, “You think we should search the place now just to make sure there isn’t anything that will try and eat us?”

Most of the others nodded while Estefania spun in the air and giggled. She at least appreciated what Matt had done.

Matt was not by himself. He had left instructions with Mari about the location he had brought them. Mari wasn’t certain if she would be able to free them but at least somebody else knew. Saying that Matt was now on his own was a lie. While Mari, Bluebird, and Buck were off doing other things, Matt did have some aid from other miniatures.

He gathered some of the ones that he had thought were more useful. Joining this stupid contents was going to be a crapshoot and Matt needed all the support he could get. Matt was unfortunately limited. Given more time he could have put together a less scuffed plan. He had already scouted out some good miniature stores.

When relearning his magic Matt had pondered if he actually needed the miniatures to summon allies. He had decided that he did. Whether it had to be the case or not, not it was definitely true. He needed those miniatures. Restrictions breed imagination or so he had been lead to understand. By being certain that he needed the miniatures it limited him but it also meant that new miniatures could mean new allies.

But that was a problem for another day. Acquiring and painting a new miniature was beyond the scope of infiltrating Doctor Amandeep’s game show. All Matt could do now was use those he currently had access to. Happily his

current miniature collection was large enough to accommodate his plans.

An old murder mystery he and his friends 'attended' contained all the miniatures he needed. The servants were the key in this case. Matt had returned home to prepare for the infiltration. He would need to appear for the beginning of the reality television early in the morning and he didn't have a minute to waste.

Matt arrived at the studio as well as he was able. He was dressed in his business clothes. A regular accountant. He even brought his suitcase. His invitation got him brought into the studio without any issues. He sat with a group of other people and watched a presentation. It explained the basic rules and what was expected of them.

There was a lot of legal paperwork that Matt also needed to fill out. There was apparently various health risks from doing the Doctor's routine and you needed to sign a waiver saying that he absolved the Doctor of any legal responsibility if any health issues happened. Since Matt was here for ulterior motives this wasn't an issue but it did all seem pretty sketchy.

He then needed to sit and do a recording. There was a coach helping him choose what to say. What Matt said would have been mostly true if he had been interviewed for this a week ago. That he was feeling tired, worn out, and like the world was dim. Matt rather doubted that the Doctor's treatment would have fixed it but in the interview he said that he hoped to leave the program a new reinvigorated man.

Finally Matt was left to wait for the first episode to begin. There were apparently other people that still needed to finish their interview and plenty of other things that needed to happen. The 'director' was a different person that Doctor Amandeep and Matt had gotten to briefly meet him. Apparently Matt's business look was perfect and nothing needed to change about that. Matt had been told to ham up the soul crushing nature of his job but that would be pretty easy to do. Matt had certainly felt like that no long ago. It wasn't even really a lie.

Matt sipped a coffee as he watched the other contestants filter into the room.

They were a pretty eclectic group. Housewives, artists, construction workers. They were a pretty full gambit of people. Including Matt there was a full dozen. They had been informed about the schedule. Today would be the day they gathered and Doctor Amandeep examined each of them. They would be given a diagnosis and a treatment regimen.

After that they would be brought to the treatment apartments where they would live while the treatment was being carried out. They would be observed during their 'reality television' experiences in the apartment. And every day Doctor Amandeep would interact with them to help them continue the treatment.

Matt didn't expect to have an opportunity to capture Doctor Amandeep during the first meeting. There would likely be too much happening for him to get the opportunity. Instead he was aiming for a time in the treatment center.

Soon enough it was time and they were called out onto the stage.

"Welcome to Doctor Amandeep's Revitalization Clinic!" Called out the announcer. The contestants were sitting in a group of plush chair clustered together on one side of the studio. There was a live studio audience who all clapped as everybody entered and took there seats.

"And introducing our host Doctor Amandeep!" The clapping was near cacophonous as Doctor Amandeep walked out onto the stage. He was of average height and slightly broader girth. He wore probably the most expensive tailored white doctor coat that Matt had ever seen. Underneath it was what looked like an equally expensive suit. His hair was black and slicked back.

"Thank you, thank you all for coming here tonight!" He said to the audience as he stepped forward onto the stage. "Welcome everybody to the third season of my Revitalization Clinic, where I take regular people ground down by the pollutants of everyday modern life and heal them!" Now even the contestants were clapping, Matt clapped along with them.

The Doctor continued, "And let us greet our first patient, here to change their outlook on the world. Welcome Ophelia Smith!" He called out the name of one of the contestants. She stood up and took the stand next to him. She introduced herself and the Doctor walked around her examining her.

Matt didn't pay too much attention to what he actually said. But he gave her some ridiculous diagnosis that the water she must be drinking was bad. She was going to go on a strict mineral water diet that would purify her, there was even some special treatments that she would undergo that would totally rejuvenate her, supposedly.

The others had similar results. Eventually however it was Matt's turn. "And we will welcome Deon Richards!" That was the name that Matt had entered under. It was probably that Doctor Amandeep knew his actual name but they were banking on the fact that Matt's appearance wasn't fully known.

Matt stood from the chair and walked to the stand next to Doctor Amandeep.

"Deon Richards here is a wage slave. Working for the man day after day. Tell us how you find that kind of lifestyle."

Matt rubbed his head, "Honestly pretty exhausting. They have me working ten hour shifts every day, sometimes even weekends. And the world just never ends or lets up. Other than for this I can't remember the last time I had taken time off either."

"Terrible." Said Doctor Amandeep. "This man has had the world against him. I can't even imagine the amount of terrible toxins that have build up in his over the years. How long have you been working for that company?"

"A little more than ten years at this point." Matt tried as hard as he could to sound like a drained and worn down office worker.

It must have worked since Doctor Amandeep gave a truly sympathetic nod. "Truely horrifying. But do not worry. We will get you fixed up right away. I have just the treatment, a collection of ancient herbs mixed into a tincture that will fix all those accumulated toxins. Soon you will be feeling like you were young once again.

With that over Matt took his seat and the remaining contestants were brought up one by one. Once they were all over, the doctor gave a big speech about the dangers of the modern world and how to avoid them. Strangely that seemed to involve buying a lot of proprietary supplements from him. While it all felt very sketching, it didn't feel particularly magical to Matt.

Doctor Amandeep was introducing a bunch of the staff that would join them

on the journey of health. Matt payed attention to who all the other contestants were and the different staff members that would be attending the “health retreat” as the doctor was calling it. Matt suspected that if there was any particularly fishy business it would be there rather than in front of a live studio audience.

After what felt like an eternity of the Doctor shilling his own product the episode finally ended. The Doctor practically immediately left and it was up to the staff and assistants to bundle off the group of contestants to their new residence.

They were put onto a bus and sent off to a compound on the far side of the town. It was a little walled off estate, away from any potential interference of prying eyes. When they arrived that was when Matt could really tell that things were definitely fishy. There were armed guards watching the property. Sure they were well dressed and not obviously armed but Matt could tell that were clearly ‘protecting’ the property.

He also felt a chill in the air, an almost electric tingle that could barely be felt. Mari had helped him learn how to feel it. It was magic in the air. Weak magic was undetectable but magic with high world imagination influence could be felt when it was actively effecting the area, at least the could when paying sharp attention and the person using it wasn’t trying hard to suppress the feeling.

Matt had learned to feel the difference when entering his own home and how it had changed into a dungeon like area. This felt like that. Matt couldn’t see anything obviously supernatural but that didn’t always mean much.

The place was a series of two story buildings. He had been told they were ‘apartments’ but clearly they were much higher class than that. There were camera setup all over the place for filming the entire experience.

They were all let out from the bus when it stopped and were given a tour of the facilities. There was everything that you could want, except the ability to leave and access to the outside world. They had already taken Matt’s cell phone during the introduction. And none of them were allowed to leave until the treatment was complete. Sure they had been told that if they needed to leave to tell any of the staff and an exit from the show could be arranged. You would just need to pay a small fee to accommodate the exit, small being very very relative. It

was the price of a nice car.

They each had their own little cottage but would get together for a variety of activities. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were all scheduled with each of them getting a 'special' meal plan that was supposedly created specifically for them by Doctor Amandeep. Matt doubted how much that was true but he wasn't about to question it.

Everything was very nice. Matt spend the time free time that was available to him now by looking over the entire place. Their real treatment as to begin in full tomorrow so they should get used to the facilities as quickly as possible. There were definitely more 'sus' areas. Several areas of the main building were locked off as 'medical' areas. This included several areas that were guarded by the armed security staff. Matt couldn't pinpoint the source of the magic however.

As he was returning to his room for the evening he bumped into one of the staff. A note quickly exchanged hands out of the sight of security cameras. Matt briefly stopped in another such area to read the note before shredding it. It looks like his speculation had been mostly right one, there was more happening at this facility than just a tv show.

It looks like each season a good number of the contestants left the show and completely vanished. Or at least brought into the secret areas for one last treatment and then were never seen again. Matt was beginning to have an idea of what this place was being used for. If his ideas was correct those strange regenerating monsters were being created here.

He returned to the room. At a cursory glance around the room didn't seem to be recorded but Matt didn't expect it to actually be clean. He placed his suitcase in the corner of the room. It had been checked by many security guards, it was just 'work' that he was expected to completed during his time here.

Really there was nothing in the suitcase. But just like he had managed to hide his miniature case when wearing the suit of armor that suitcase was also the method of hiding them. It was his protection in case anybody tried to harm him during the night. He slept reasonable soundly in the overly comfortable bed.

In the morning their regiment was starting in full. Breakfast was apparently carefully calibrated and was 'healthy' but mostly it just tasted bland and like

cardboard. They had to do a whole bunch of exercises and checkups after that to make sure everything was currently good with them.

They didn't even see Doctor Amandeep anytime that day. But they were still busy starting their regiment. There were all kinds of health drinks that they were given to each of them to help them 'purge' all the toxins in their body.

Matt thought it mostly looked like the bogus stuff that Amandeep was peddling but he still made it 'disappear' rather than drinking them. There might be some strange ingredient in them that it would be better for him not to imbue.

During this time Matt had also began to formulate a plan on how to capture Amandeep. While it was true that to bring him somewhere else Matt would need a few moments of uninterrupted with with Amandeep practically within reach. The real wrench was what kind of powers Amandeep had. Matt was beginning to put shape to that magic. His magic likely had plenty of restrictions, something that required a facility like this to properly accomplish. Matt suspected some kind of alchemy or other mad science.

It was Amandeep's schedule itself that would give Matt the opportunity. There was the 'group therapy' session, hosted by Amandeep himself. He would be joining the next day, doing individual meetings with each of the contestants and the day would end with the group session. That was Matt opportunity.

Matt just needed to get past the individual meeting without attracting too much attention. The one on one meetings sounded like they had the most potential danger. That night Matt bumped into another one of the workers, this time it was Matt who passed a paper over.

The morning the next began as normal but just as breakfast was ending there was a quiet and then Doctor Amandeep appeared. There were cheering for him by the staff. He paraded in like he owned the place, which he likely did.

"I'm glad you are all doing so well at your beginning treatments. Today I'll be meeting with each of you and tailoring a personalized and special treatment. One that will improve your wellbeing in every well." While he was saying that one of his staff tacked a schedule to the board behind Amandeep. "You will find your time to meet with me on this board. Make sure to be there on time."

He left with as much fanfare as he arrived. Everybody gathered by the schedule notice to check when their meeting was. Matt went up to check the list. It looked like he was fourth. Matt had already done all his preparations so he simply just waited for his turn.

The first person to join the meeting however need returned. There was a quick announcement that she had decided to drop out of the health clinic and she had already been escorted from the premises. There was mummings of disappointment that somebody had already dropped out so early. Matt however was worried that it meant that the Doctor was already bringing people away.

When the next two people left the meeting properly and continued their treatment like expected Matt felt a little bit of relief. He had been avoiding the special health drinks he was supposed to be taking. Nobody seemed to be showing any particular signs of unusual changes, just the normal 'I feel healthier' sentiment.

When Matt entered the meeting he was seated in a chair across from the Doctor. The place looked like a combination fancy office and scientist laboratory. However everything was too clean. It was a set not an actual location of practice.

"I hope the treatment center has been treating you tell. You have been taking well to the exercise I hear. How have you been feeling?" Asked Doctor Amandeep.

Matt had received prep from the staff on how he should talk, assuming things didn't go off the rails. "I feel things have been going well. I feel lighter, more relaxed then I think I have felt in years. I can't say I enjoy your special shakes though, they don't taste particularly good."

Amandeep laughed, it was very canned pre-prepared laugh, "I have heard that a lot. But they are very good for you so I hope you will continue to take them. You have been so long in the grim of the modern world that I think it will take a long time for you to truly recover. How would you feel about staying here for a while longer after the initial treatment. I think it would really let you free yourself from the terrible toxins."

Matt looked around nervously. "I don't think my job would really appreciate that. They were already pretty resistant to me using my vacation time to attend

just for this short treatment. They would probably be livid if I took any more time off. Not that I don't want to do it, I do, I just don't think I could manage it."

"I see. How tragic. I think we really could have done something for you." Then Doctor Amandeep paused like he was considering something. The length of the pause was perfectly timed, too perfect. "Although, perhaps we can do something about that. I hear you are a talented individual. How would you like to switch over to working for me? I would help take you out of that terrible work environment, you could continue your treatment, and you could become part of the Amandeep Family."

Matt internally wanted to comment that it sounded a whole lot like a crime family when you put it like that, but he realized it probably was actually a lot like a crime family. A magic crime family, assuming it was an actual offer and not just a way to discretely disappear Matt without anybody realizing it.

Matt spoke, trying to mask the enthusiasm in his voice, "Really? You would do that for me? I don't know what to say, that would be a dream come true."

"Hahaha. I'm glad you like the offer. We will leave all the details to the end of your stay here so for now just enjoy yourself and finish your treatment. I'm going to double your shake treatment. You can now have one both in the morning and the evening. There will also be some extra special ingredients that I will be adding. It can take a while for them to work so I didn't want to add them initially if you were just going to stop at the end of your stay but now I'm sure you will appreciate them."

"You have my thanks Doctor Amandeep."

"Hahaha. No need to thank me. I'm just doing what any doctor would do... or at least what any doctor should do. I hope to see you again this evening for the group therapy."

Matt nodded as he stood, "Don't worry, I will be there." Matt left the room. It had gone well enough. He was seeing more into Amandeep's plan and workflow. This place was both for experimentation and for recruitment. People who didn't believe in him wouldn't likely join anyways and then he could weed out anybody during the normal treatment duration. It was all pretty obvious now that Matt was participating in it.

He stopped at one of the corners of the main building. It would be where the group therapy would be later in the day. It was also a location where there were no recording cameras. Matt knelt down near a bush. Scratched a square in the ground underneath one of the bushes. Like a magician Matt produced a miniature of a red lizard and placed it on the square.

There were three other places like this he had located since yesterday. It took him several additional hours to safely find time to get to each of those other locations, wait for nobody else to be around, and then place another miniature is a scratched square in the dirt.

Once all four had been place he could spend the extra time alternating between resting and doing some exercise. He did have to admit that there was a benefit to spending some time here that he had not been able to do with is previous schedule.

It was later in the evening when it was time for everybody to gather. Out of the initial group two had 'left' the program during these meetings. There were now only ten people left. While this was supposed to be some kind of group therapy it consisted mostly of Doctor Amandeep standing in the center of the room and telling stories that were supposed to have some deep meaning associated with them.

By the time he had started his third story everybody had pretty much settled in for this being the evening. Matt felt like he was the only one who thought this was pointless to the extreme. It was then that the power flickered. It wasn't very extreme, just a minor flickering. The others didn't seem to really notice but Doctor Amandeep suddenly began to look around almost worriedly.

As he did so two workers came in through the doors and began whispering to him. He called out to everybody. "Alright everybody. Not to worry. Our therapy session will continue in just a few minutes. I'll be back just as soon as I am done making sure nothing is wrong. He then turned and left the room.

Everybody looked confused as Doctor Amandeep left but Matt took this as his opportunity. He approached the door that Amandeep had just left through and waited there. While all the conditions on his magic were quite true there was one particular work around that he could take advantage of. He watched through the

glass door into the outside.

He waited and waited. Then he saw the hand sign of one of the workers. He closed his eyes and began saying the words, slowly and precisely. The other contestants probably saw him but they weren't the ones he was worried about recognizing what he was doing.

"We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." Just as the last words were spoken, Doctor Amandeep stepped through the doors into the group session room. Then Doctor Amandeep was gone, just disappeared into thin air. There was confusion as the contestants began looking at each other and then they began shouting.

It was then that a squad of soldiers wearing tactical gear broke stepped into the room. "Quiet everybody. Please, quiet. They began taking the people and escorting them out of the building.

Matt was still there. He watched the soldiers as they took the other contestants one at a time. When the leader of the group stepped up to Matt. "Sir, we have gotten rid of the civilians. Are you ready to raid the potential kidnapping ring?"

Matt nodded. He took a piece of body armor and some sunglasses from the man and put them on. He now looked like a suspicious government agent. "Yes, I am ready Sergeant Daniel. Let us save those people. They stepped outside and toward the main staff building.

Several of the armed guards on the property began to block their way but as soon as the soldiers stepped forward the guards quickly backed down. Two of the soldiers stepped aside to handcuff the guards. They might not know what they were actually participating in but better not to take any chances.

The door to the staffing area was locked but it only took one of the soldiers a second to kick down the door. Matt followed just behind them. He unbuttoned his suit to reveal the gun hidden underneath. The studio certainly wouldn't have allowed him to have this but Matt had many ways of smuggling things into places.

"My spies have told me there is an underground facility. The door to which is over there." Matt pointed toward a door on the corridor on the right side. The

soldiers gathered around the door. Then with surgical precision they broke through the door. Then along with Matt they stepped down the stairs into the basement.

Matt knew they were in the right place because now he could practically feel the magic in the air. It was mostly noticeable as a strange vibration that he could detect in his teeth. Then there was the howling of some terrible creature.

As they reached the bottom it came rushing at them. A crustacean like monster with claws on both hands. One of the soldiers had a riot shield and blocked the charge while the others unloaded on the monster. It quickly fell to the ground. Then it began to heal.

"Roast it." Said Matt. One of the soldiers unholstered a flamethrower that had been on his back. He then proceeded to light it up. The others stepped back to stay out of the direct heat. Whatever the healing was it could not properly recover from that kind of damage.

When the flamethrower was holstered again it was no longer moving. The soldiers and Matt stepped over its body and proceeded through the rooms. There were no more monsters but there were a couple of scientist looking people that were quickly taken into custody.

In the back were some prison cells. The two contestants who had 'left the show' were trapped inside. They looked like they had been drugged. The soldiers helped free them and were beginning to take them outside.

"Sergeant Daniel. Does it look like you have everything under control here? These is one more thing that needs my attention."

He nodded, "Indeed, I believe we have everything covered. If another one of those things shows up we will just use the flamer again."

Excellent. Now if you will excuse me. Matt left the building. He stood outside, closed his eyes, chanted the words and then he too was gone. He found himself standing in the room on the space station. Around him was a group of very shell shocked looking warriors in different colors.

Doctor Amandeep was nowhere to be found but there was a large red stain of blood on the ground in the center of the room.

"What in the hells man!" Red shouted at Matt as soon as he actually managed

to realize that Matt was there.

Chapter 6: Another Try

Not too long ago Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow had been enjoying their space vacation as much as much as they could. It have been a couple of days since Matt had disappeared and left them there. They had taken turns keeping while over the room and exploring the space station.

It was a pretty big place. Like an entire apartment building with and attached shopping mall. It was all completely deserted but there was still a lot of stuff left in the apartments and shops. It seemed wrong to just look the place they only took the things they would need. Food and some various forms of entertainment.

This included a ping-pong table that had been found in the sports center. It was then brought up to the room they were guarding so they could both play and keep an eye out. Being completely alone was a bit creepy however. There were all kinds of strange sounds that came from the echoing hallways.

Sometimes it was Estefania floating by and making strange sounds, other times there was no explanation for what caused the sound. They just had to calk it up to old machinery and hoped that nothing would fail on them while they were staying here.

Estefania came as went as she desired. Sometimes she as around, other times she was enjoying herself in some there part of the space station. During the third day she seemed to be napping in the air while the others were doing some 2v2 ping-pong. They were all pretty good at it

It was in the middle of one of the swings that there was a whooshing of air. They all turned to see Doctor Amandeep appear out of nowhere. The paddles were immediately dropped and the ball disappeared across the room. Estefania blinked open her eyes. It had already been moments but everybody was prepared.

Doctor Amandeep was not caught completely unprepared. He had already sensed something was wrong just before he was teleported away. He had been called away to deal with a minor issue in the power network. It turned out to not

be anything but that made him very slightly worried. So he was keeping an eye out.

When he had felt the odd chill he knew something was wrong. He had suddenly been moved somewhere else, moved by magic. So he started moving immediately knowing that this must be some kind of trap. Three vials were pulled out of his doctor's clothing and thrown against the floor.

They shattered into a cloud of swirling vapor immediately. That kept the warriors at bay for a second. Then they realized they were all wearing masks and moved in to deal with Amandeep. Only to discover that their armor began to become eaten away by the aerosolized acid. That gave Amandeep even longer to draw out some extra potions and begin to drink them.

His form began to shift and turn as he got larger, bursting free from his doctor robes. As the acid mist began to dissipate he grabbed green and flung him across the room. As Green slammed against the wall the entire space station seemed to creak. Then a loud screeching began to come from everywhere.

Everybody paused. Both Red and Doctor Amandeep stopped, watching each other carefully. They both turned their heads, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. Then the ventilation duct just above them broke free of the ceiling. A giant clawed arm snaked out, twisting through the air.

It grabbed Doctor Amandeep and pulled up him through the ventilation. There was screaming that echoed down the hole. Then the screaming abruptly ended. Drops and then a drizzle of blood poured down out of the ventilation duct.

Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow just stood there. They stared at the hole in the ceiling, their nerves strung tight. Any moment that hand could reach out again and grab one of them. The looked around and saw some of the other vents in the room. What had been a casual room for recreation had just turning into something terrifying.

How long they stood there in tense silence they didn't know. It was only when Matt appeared out of nowhere did the silence get broken.

"What in the hells man!" Shouted Red.

Matt looked around like he was looking for something, "What is the matter?"

He seemed genuinely confused.

"There is some monster hiding in the vests. When Amandeep appeared it just reached out of one of the vents, grabbed him, and pulled in into the vests. It must have killed him in there. Whatever the hell that is doesn't matter, you need to get us out of here right now." Red was practically screaming at Matt.

"Oh? I thought it had been killed. Huh... guess it survived. Alright then. Everybody had better gather up. And try not to smell funny, it is attracted to very odd smells." Even though their faces were hidden by the masks they each moved in nervously, glancing at the air ducts uncertainly.

Estefania didn't look too concerned as she floated nearby as well. Matt closed his eyes and after a couple of words they all disappeared. They appeared back where Matt had transitioned, another quirk of his magic.

Once they had finally out of the space station it was like a collective gasp of relief struck all of them. Red still seemed furious as he stared at Matt, like he was demanding an explanation.

"I'm sorry Red, I truly didn't know that thing was still alive. It should have been dead and that place really should have been safe for you. I'm really sorry that I didn't tell you it was a possibility but we were in a hurry and I didn't think there was even a small chance it still lived."

The man stared down at Matt. Finally after a long moment Red said, "Fine, None of us were harmed because of your negligence so I will forgive you this time. But don't let it happen again. Negligence can be criminal if it keeps happening." He turned and stalked away. While he said he forgave Matt he was still obviously peeved about the whole thing.

The others followed him, leaving just Matt and Estefania alone together. Once they were out of earshot Estefania burst into laughter. "That is great. If I could have seen their faces it would have been even better. That beast managed to get Doctor Amandeep in one blow. Kerpow." She slammed her fists together and then released them. "Nice and tricky. Good work."

Matt couldn't meet her eyes as he looked away, "I don't know what you are talking about. As I said to Red, I didn't know that monster was there."

"Sure... sure..." She said as she floating away up in the sky. "See you

tomorrow at my place where we can discuss the final cultist."

As she too disappeared into the sky Sergeant Daniel stepped up next to Matt. "Strange associates you have there. Did your other task go well?"

Matt nodded, "Yes, the local ringleader of the kidnappers has been dealt with. Is everything ready to turn this place over to the local authorities?"

Sergeant Daniel nodded, "Yes, we are all ready. And you should leave before anybody from the media arrives to ask questions."

"Thanks Sergeant. I'll contact you again if I need your aid in the future."

"Take care sir."

Matt nodded as he walked away. When he exited the compound a car drove up next to the curb. Out of the car stepped a woman. One of the two servants in the compound who had been acting as his spy. Matt nodded at her as well before stepped into the black car and driving away. As he rounded a corner he car rippled to reveal the car that Matt normally drove.

That had all worked out as well as could be expected. Matt had expected Amandeep to have lower combat capabilities than other mages but he hadn't expected it to be that easy. A new worry was growing in Matt's mind. The Lady's prophecy, this, all of this, it was far too easy. Sure there might have been all kinds of social issues with dealing with Doctor Amandeep but Matt felt like the warriors could have dealt with him without any issues.

Matt had been making plans assuming everything was going to be city shatteringly dangerous. Had the monster and the warriors failed to kill Amandeep then Matt had been prepared to blow up the entire space station to deal with him. The fact that he had been stopped so easily was worrisome.

If this was all it took, how could he be the only hope for the city. There were only two real possibilities. Either the third cultist leader was the linchpin that connected everything. A mage so dangerous that the others were just apprentices to him. Or Matt was getting played. Both seemed quite probable but Matt hadn't figured out which it was.

Estefania clearly had some additional knowledge here but whether she could deceive Matt on a grand scale was feeling pretty unlikely. But not completely impossible, and it was on this side Matt felt like The Lady was a more likely

candidate for the source of the deception.

When he returned to his home it was empty. Neither his gang nor Mari were there. That let him breathe in a breathe of relief. He got to pour himself a glass of water and relax on a couch. Things had been so busy recently that he hadn't properly had any good times to just lay back and relax.

"Relax?" He mused. He hadn't felt like he needed to relax when he had been spending all his time working. But now it felt like there was a weight of responsibility which might have tired him out much more than mindlessly working had.

He looked over at the bookcase. For the first time in a long time he felt like he wanted to do some reading. But the bookcase was disappointing. He didn't have anything interesting in it. It was mostly filled with books about accounting and other work related topics. But he did remember something.

He stood up and walked over to the closet. Inside he found the book. It was old, the cover in rough state. He had read it many times before. It was another thing he hadn't been able to get rid of when moving. He returned to the couch with it. It was the story of a group of heroes who traveled across the land to defeat an ancient evil.

It wasn't particularly well written, Matt knew that. But he had loved the book. When he had been child he had read it many many times. A lot of the adventures he had helped tell were inspired by the story in this book.

Matt smiled as he turned the pages in the book, rereading something for the first time in ages. He had thought he had perfectly remembered everything in the book but there were details that had slipped his memory.

"Slipped... my memory..." Matt contemplated. There had been so many stories they had told together as children. What was it he was doing now... This wasn't right he felt. From the beginning he felt like it wasn't right. He, Matt, should never be the protagonist of a story. As a child and even now he didn't feel like he had protagonist qualities.

He looked at the book. He felt more like the wizard that guided the hero. Or maybe the quirky anti-hero that join the protagonist. But the hero? That wasn't really him. He had been on the back foot since Estefania came into his life that he

hadn't be able give this proper consideration. It was what had felt so wrong about him going against the Night King, that wasn't even his sword...

"It wasn't my sword." Matt pondered that. "Somebody really must be playing me like a fool. But who." He still wasn't certain. But he didn't like being a fool, making people fools was his job.

He needed to flip the script and could think of no better way to do it than to introduce the true protagonist to the story.

He pulled out his phone and began making a call. "Hello Mari. No, this isn't about your research. I actually wanted to ask you about something else." He then told her what it was that he wanted. She sounded pretty excited as Matt put away his phone.

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In the morning Matt was feeling a bit more confident. Regardless of what might happen he now had a plan. You could never be certain that your plan would work but it was better to have a plan then to just be floundering in the darkness.

There was still the off chance that everything was above board but Matt certainly wasn't counting on it. He drove up to the mansion in his car. The colored warriors were already there and Blue waved him toward them. Red still looked a bit annoyed but didn't say anything.

"Have you gotten any clues from Estefania about what is coming next? She didn't say anything to me but I expect she might have some clue about who the last member is."

Blue shrugged, "We know about as much as you at this point. The captured necromancer hasn't said anything useful about the last cultist. We have a vague description but nothing that could accurately point out who that might be."

"I have some potential sources." Said Matt, "But nothing that would be quick enough to turn around a result in one day. I can only assume that Estefania already knows who it is."

Just as Matt was mentioning her the doors of the manor opened up and Estafania waved at them. She then floated back inside.

Green said, "She really does just float everywhere. Has anybody ever seen her walk?"

They all shook their heads.

Everybody followed Estefania into the manor. They were led to a dining room. There was the long table but otherwise the room was empty. It seems appropriate that they all took seats around the table. The head of the table was missing a chair so Estefania was just floating there.

The Lady was also there. She was silently waiting in one of the chairs while everybody else took their seat.

"Two down, one to go." Said Estefania. "But this is going to be the most difficult of the three to take down."

"Who is it?" Asked Blue.

"The leader of the cult is called Sri. I have some of his other aliases but that name will be sufficient for our purposes. What matters is that is a generational mage, came from a long line of mages. Somewhere along the way he learned about the Night King and made contact with the entity. It then corrupted his mind so he became obsessed with releasing the Night King from its prison."

"You've know who it was this whole time?" Asked Red, a bit of gruffness in his voice.

Estefania nodded, "Yes but he is extremely dangerous. I didn't want anybody attempting to look into him before I was ready to deal with him. If he took action too early it would jeopardize everything. It was most important to deal with his allies first. While he is a powerful mage his social capabilities are lacking. Both the other mages were important not because they were strong but because they brought social strength and broad action. Both things that Sri is bad at."

"So now it is time to go after him?" Said Red.

"Yes, regardless of our current work I am expecting him to attempt the summoning of the Night King. Given that The Lady's paintings never show Sri after the destruction I can only suspect one thing. With his allies dead he is going to attempt the summoning anyways, and sacrifice himself to make sure that it succeeds."

There was grumbling around the table. Finally Green spoke up, "Doesn't that

mean that our interference made the summoning happen earlier?"

"Likely true. However a fully prepared ritual with all three of them present would have been the worst case scenario. And I had it on good authority that it was coming up soon anyways. We sped up the timeframe about a month or two."

"So what is the plan?" Asked Matt.

"While I don't know where his current hidden lair is, I do know there are some pretty strict restrictions on when and where the ritual to release the Night King must be held. The Night King must be released on a New Moon."

"That is tomorrow night right?" Said Yellow.

Estefania nodded, "Precisely. It must also be held inside a particularly large underground cavern. That leaves not very many potential locations. In fact there is one specific location that is where the ritual is going to happen. The Old Gizzard caves."

"Isn't that a tourist cavern?" Said Yellow.

"Yes, most of the time it is. However that isn't going to stop an evil wizard bent on releasing an ancient evil. So the best we have is to get there before him and lay a trap for him."

Green looked around at the others in uncertainty before he spoke up, "But wouldn't that be what he is doing to? He would want to trap us as much as we want to trap him."

Estefania flipped over, "That is why I have you guys. We need to prevent this summoning and prevent Sri from escaping. While we could stop the summoning we also want to prevent him from trying the summoning again elsewhere."

"Is there a reason he isn't just going to do that anyways?" Asked Matt.

She shrugged, "Celestial alignments I think? From what I've been able to gather there is only the opportunity of summoning for a couple of months once every couple of decades. I would think he desperately wants to avoid that."

"But he could try again next month or the month after that?" Asked Matt.

"Yeah, and we want to avoid that. But defeating him is going to be difficult. He is an old school mage. Think wands and spell books. Normally they have lots of weaknesses but very experienced mages can compensate for those weaknesses

and he is very experienced. Without Doctor Amandeep there won't be more corrupted monsters but that doesn't mean that Sri doesn't have any at his aid. There will also be some apprentices."

"Sounds like a lot." Grumbled Red.

"Only Sri is important. If we can eliminate him the others can be dealt with later."

"And the Avatar?" Asked Matt.

Estefania nodded, "Yes, even if we stop the full ritual there is still a good chance that Sri will call upon an avatar of the Night King. The good news is that if he does that we have been successful at stopping the Night King, bad news is that we need to then kill it or we will be the ones dying."

"Sounds like a lot of danger." Said Green who seemed the most nervous.

"Yup." Estefania sounded light hearted, "But we have you and Matt so we can do it."

"Any chance Matt can send Sri into space like he did for Amandeep?" Asked Red.

"Plausible." Said Matt. "However if this Sri is as dangerous as Estefania says I don't know if I'll have time to send him there. And even if I do he might be able to take out the monster in the space station. Besides we can't really join the monster in fighting Sri."

"I'm sure you will come up with some amazing plan." Said Estefania. She then began to float away.

"You aren't going to join us in making a plan to stop Sri?" Asked Matt.

"Nope. I believe in you. I have another plan to put into motion. Try not to need me to collapse the cave system on you." She said it so cheerfully as she floated out of the room.

"You think she will actually do it?" Asked Blue nervously.

"Totally." Said both Red and Matt at the same time. They looked at each other before Red finally grumbled a laugh.

Then Red said, "Alright then. Let us figure out the plan for dealing with that many dangerous enemies. But you need to cover all your bases, no unknown monsters interrupting us this time."

"I promise." Said Matt. "I think it would be best to lure Sri into the center of the caves. He comes in thinking it will just be us. Then extra enemies come in from all sides."

"Extra enemies? Who is going to be joining us?" Asked Red.

"Like I summoned the dog I can summon more. It takes time and preparation but we are going to have that here." Matt then went on to explain what he wanted to do in the caverns. He felt a little bit guilty that he continued to lie to Red. This wasn't his whole plan, this was just what Red needed to know. If there wasn't actually any grand mastermind then this was all that was needed.

They also needed to have an assault plan in case it was Sri that had setup in the cave. Matt's magical allies played an important role in that plan too. Once they had made all the decisions, the colored warriors left to rest up for the next couple of days.

Matt sat in the room alone. No... he wasn't alone. He looked over at The Lady who had been sitting there and listening the whole time. He stared at her for a while before finally deciding on what he wanted to ask, "That painting of me fighting the Night King. Why is it like that?" It was a simple question and he wasn't expecting an answer.

Obviously she didn't speak. Instead she stood up and began walking away. Then she paused and motioned for Matt to follow her. He did follow her until they arrived at her room of paintings. It was much the same as it had been when Matt had last been there.

The painting she had been working on when he was previously there seemed almost done, it you could really call it done. It looked like the face of somebody. The smeared circles of red for the eyes. The messy black lines of the face. All her previous paintings were clean but this one looked more wild and mad.

"What is that painting of?" Ask Matt.

She turned back to look at him. She stared for a while before returning to look at the painting herself. Then she moved over to the rack of paintings. She pulled one out and set it aside for him to look at.

Matt stared at it. He knew what it was showing, he saw the drawing, but he tried to comprehend what it meant. In the center of the painting was a pile of

corpses but not just any corpse. They were Matt, all of them. The Matt's all looked a bit different, wearing different clothing, many wearing armor or carrying weapons. But all of them dead.

And above them in the sky was an equal amount of Estefanias. Floating in the air. All the same. All crying is despair.

Matt reached out a little toward the painting, "What does this mean?" He looked over at the Lady who just shook her head, maybe she didn't know what it meant either.

Then she brought out a second painting. This one was also of Matt. He was sitting on a chair, an ominous black throne. He was leaning forward over a board, one much like the one from the shed, covered in lines criss-crossing the surface. On the table were minis, those clearly representing the colored warriors, Estafania, the two cultists that were already dead, and another who could only be the sinister figure of Sri.

The Matt in the painting was reaching down to make a move on the board, holding in his hand a piece that looked like the Night King from the other painting.

"Me? Am I behind it? That.... Is that possible?" He asked The Lady. Like before she did not respond.

He stared at the paintings. His mind was tying itself into knots trying to figure out what they meant. It was clearly important. Was the Lady just attempting to manipulate him using them. He had considered that she was the mastermind but this... this was not what he had expected from her at all.

"Are there any other painting you need to share with me?" Matt asked.

The Lady shook her head. She returned to the seat and continued splashing black paint onto the horrific new creation. Matt returned his eyes to the paintings. Were this metaphorical, literal? Matt didn't know. Eventually all he could do was leave. There wasn't anything concrete enough here for him to change his current plans.

Many Estefanias and Matts? A sinister manipulator Matt? What could it mean? He only had a few ideas about that it could be about and none of them

were anything good. The danger of prophecy also niggled at his mind. Would taking action to prevent these actually cause them? Or was it not acting that caused it.

Matt decided that overthinking it was the wrong solution. That was probably more likely to cause the problem is stories had taught him anything. The correct action was to do what he thought was right.

So he had two things he needed to do before they went to the cavern. The first was heading to the model shop that he had been delaying going to. He had know about it for some time but had been avoiding it for the same reason he had been avoiding everything else.

Now his fears were mostly banished so he felt confident going there.

He arrived at "Evening Games" it was a pretty large store. Not just models but board games and many other hobby products. Matt stepped through nervously. There were shelves and shelves full of products that kept drawing his eye. He had been gone from this for so long that he didn't know what to do.

If only he had more time. Instead he needed to focus on his next task. He found several shelves of miniatures and was looking through them. He had some ideas in his mind but he needed to decide what it was that would make the biggest difference. He was also very limited in time, only one full day was available too him.

Looking over everything he felt that he could only choose two small models. Anything else would be too much for him to do in time. Even that would be plenty of work. He also picked up several paintbrushes and a pile of paints. Everything he previously had in that regard was gone so he grabbed everything that he thought he would need.

Matt looked around the store curiously as the clerk checked him out. Once he had done everything he needed to do he needed to come back to this place. There were all kinds of things that looked interesting to him. And he felt like he could taste something strange in the air. It felt almost like magic. That seemed reasonable, a place like this was probably a hot bed for imagination. Even if there were no current mages, this could easily be a birthplace for one. After all places like this had been what sparked his imagination when he was a child.

As he left the place he give it one last glance. Next time he would take his time here. He just needed to make sure there was a next time.

Matt returned home. He found it empty again. Mari and Bluebird both had big projects. Matt quickly noted out some extra details that they should know and left it on the table. He then brought his new purchases into the back room. It had previously be his 'office' although he almost never used it since he had spent all the time at work.

Now it looked ominously like the room in the painting by the Lady. Sure he didn't have a creepy throne. But the room did have a table full of miniatures. This is where all his miniatures ended up to avoid just having them on the dining room table. He put those thoughts out of his head and instead put all the old miniatures into various cabinets.

Then he took the new miniatures and set them down on the table. He quickly did what needed to be done in assembling them. Then he brought them outside to give them a quick spray paint of primer. Once that was done he returned to his office to begin the painting.

It had been more than a decade since he had last done any painting. He felt rusty and his brush strokes were uneven. He felt a bit disappointed that he wasn't doing this miniature proper but he couldn't be too picky about how things turned out.

What was most important was the heart and believe of what he was doing not the actual execution. At least that is what Matt told himself as he got more used to painting again. He spend most of the day working on the first miniature, trying to get used to it again. By the time he put the mini down it was late into the night.

The colors and the paint was good enough. He wished he could spend a little bit longer on it, improve a bit more, make the mini into something even more special. But he could not. He had to set it down and go to sleep. He only had one more day of preparation and the second mini needed to be done by the end of that day.

In the morning Matt met with Mari who stopped by in the morning. "Oh... a new mini!" She said excitedly. "That..." She looked at the miniature and then

back at Matt, "Oh, you sly cheater."

Matt looked up from the gray flesh of the creature he was painting and at Mari. "Prophecy is meant to be cheated. Is the other part of the prophecy cheat ready?" Asked Matt.

"He wants you to come and meet him first." She said.

He paused at his painting. His hand shook a little bit. Matt set down his paint brush. "He wants to meet with me." He breathed in and out slowly. "Yeah, that makes sense. Alright. Is he available today?"

Mari nodded. "I can setup a meeting at a coffee shop if you want."

Matt closed his eyes. When he opened them a little bit of the resolve had returned to them again. "Alright do that. Tell me when and I'll be there."

"Two o'clock."

Matt nodded. At that point Mari left him alone. Matt stared at the model for a long time before he finally recovered the courage needed to life up the brush and continue painting. He knew that his plan would eventually cause them to meet again. It should feel this hard. But Matt still felt the fear welling up within him. But now he was determined to face the fear straight on rather than forgetting about it.

The miniature managed to distract him until near the arranged meeting time. Matt managed to put down the mini. It was time. He went downstairs and got into his car. Mari had sent him directions to the coffee shop. At he got out of his car and looked over at the coffee shop Matt almost stopped. No, he thought, he needed to continue.

He took one last deep breath and walked into the coffee shop.

At the table, not too far away was a man. He was older than Matt remembered him but that red hair made him easy to recognize. The other man quickly raised up his hand. He had also recognized Matt and was waving him over.

"Curtis." Matt said as he took the other seat next to him.

"Matt! How's it going! I haven't seen you in ages! You are looking pretty skinny. My mom would ask if you have been eating if she was here."

"She always did like to feed us."

"Tell me how you have been! You must have some kind of great story to tell me."

He sounded excited, energetic, happy. "I'm glad to see you too Curtis. But I'm afraid I don't have any story to tell you about what happened since we last met." Matt looked down at the table. "After.... After disappearing on you and the others. And after my parents died, I couldn't bring myself to meet up with you again. Sorry."

He smiled not putting too much energy into his next words. "Hey man, I understand. We knew it was hard on you. But I don't think we know how hard it would be. We relied on you and you relied on us. And I think we failed you. You needed us but we also just disappeared from your life."

"We were kids." Said Matt.

"True enough. But that doesn't mean I don't regret it. Now let me get you a drink before we continue." Curtis stood up and went and got drinks for both of them before returning. "You still like the ones with funny flavors right?"

Matt chuckled, "I guess I do, although I can't remember the last time I had one." He accepted the drink from Curtis. "What about you? How has your life been?"

"Me and Tecla got married. Can you believe it? We used to get into so many argument as kids."

Matt grinned, "Oh, I can believe it. Actually I would have been more surprised if you hadn't gotten married in the last ten years."

"What??" He said surprised. "Are you saying it was that obvious? Tecla also says that it was but I think she is just teasing me."

"Oh.... It was very obvious." Matt sipped the drink. The taste was strange and that strangeness was nostalgic. "And has that been going well?"

"We have our first kid. Still young and we are spending all our time trying to deal with her."

"A kid... is that so?" Matt was almost stunned. He knew it had been ten years. Being married and having a kid, that wasn't actually too strange for them. "Does that mean..." He trailed off.

"I'm totally helping you."

“What? Why? What about your child?”

“That child is the reason why.” His face had turned serious. “Mari said that the city is in danger. I can’t just leave that to other people, I need to be there protecting her. And if I am the person you need then I am the person who will be there.”

Matt glanced around before carefully saying, “And about magic?”

“Both me and Telca remember. We aren’t quite as in touch as Mari has been but you would be surprised how much magical shenanigans a child can get up to. I don’t know if they are all like that but I swear our little Brya is a bundle of danger.”

“Alright then. I only want to include you if you want to be included but I do think I need your help. How much has Mari told you?”

“Basically that an evil cult is trying to bring their dark god down to this world and we need to stop it.”

“That is basically what I am doing. But there are a bunch of oddities. The first of which is your sword. In a prophetic painting the sword of Grimkey the Dragon Slayer but the person who is holding it in the painting is me.”

“Then do you need the sword? I would be happy to lend it to you.”

“That aside, the primary issue is that me with a sword fighting off a dark god is kinda farfetched. And prophecies can be tricky to interpret.”

“You think it might be something weird? Like me disguised as you or something?”

“You’re the hero aren’t you?”

“Me, a hero?” He sounded a bit skeptical at that declaration.

“That is why you are here now offering to help me right? Because you can’t leave it to other people. That is you being a hero.”

Curtis shrugged, “I guess if you say so. I don’t feel like a hero. But if you need me to act the part then I’ll oblige you. Now tell me what you are going to need me to do.”

Matt explained his plan to Curtis. Once he was done explaining everything. “Whew. That isn’t a half measure. That certainly is quite the trick but I can get

behind it. And I think I can accomplish the party you gave me, although I will need your help. I'm pretty rusty at actually fighting. If you could bring me somewhere to practice that would be appreciated."

Matt nodded, "Alright. I'll do that. I won't be able to bring you backward and forward personally so I'll have to setup a door to you. You remember the shed?"

"How could I forget that place?"

"I'm going to put the door there. It should be available by this evening. Just show whenever. Your ready. I'll also leave everything else needed for the plan to work there too. Make sure to keep in contact with Mari too, she will be needed as well."

"What about Tecla or Sheldon?"

"Tecla needs to take care of the kid right? Although if she wants to help, you can allow her to. I can't be the one to tell her she can't. And Sheldon... Mari said that he isn't in town anymore."

"I don't want Tecla to fight but I also can't say no if she insists. I can only hope she agrees with me." He shrugged, "And you're right about Sheldon, but I do keep in contact with him. I can send out the call if you want me too."

Matt resisted for a moment but eventually relented, "You can contact him. I would be happy to have him if he is capable of joining but I don't know if he will be able to join in time."

Curtis hesitated, "What about Frey?"

Matt made a conflicted expression, "Mari already tried to contact him. He is angry at me."

Curtis shook his head, "Yeah, I thought so. He did say that he would never forgive you for disappearing like that. I guess he really did mean it." They both sighed. "I'll try and talk with him but I don't know if he will change his mind, he can be stubborn like that."

"Thanks."

"No problem! I'm just glad to have you back. Just don't disappear again, we need to find some time to gather again and actually have some fun, not just this dangerous talk."

Matt had finished his drink. So he stood. "But I really do mean it. Thanks

Curtis.”

They waved goodbye to each other as Matt left. He was glad that Curtis was the same as ever, well, his personality was the same. Many things had changed for everybody and they weren't the same people they were as children. More responsibilities, more trauma, more experience with life.

Matt had hoped the encounter with Curtis would be exactly what happened. Curtis was the one Matt had always felt with the most friendly, the most accepting, the hero.

Still... married with a child. Matt should have really expected that. Matt shook his head, how much time had he lost by drowning in his own sadness. The news that Frey was still angry had hurt Matt, it was part of what had made it hard to come visit Curtis. Mari had been excited to try and rejoin the gang but one of them did not want to rejoin.

Matt cleared his head. He still needed to finish his mini for today and get the shed setup for Curtis. He focused on driving home and then focused on finishing the mini. He got this one done faster than the previous one. He was still slower than he had been years ago but he was breaking free from the rust.

He took the second mini and drove to the park. When he arrived at the shed it was quiet. He wanted to relax and reminisce but did not have time. Matt set the mini down next to the doorway. He closed his eyes, chanted the words, and when he opened them the shed had changed.

He remembers this look, the secret hideout. It didn't look that much different from the outside but the inside now looked like a spy lair. Full of all kinds of secret spying tools. That wasn't what Curtis needed though, it was the trapdoor and the ladder down into the basement that was what he had needed.

A humanoid being with a gray body and no features stood there next to Matt. Matt stared at it and he assumed that it was staring back at him despite the fact that it had no eyes.

Matt brought out a folder and a bag that chinked with coin and set them both on the table. “These is what I need you to do and your payment for accomplishing it. I hope the price is acceptable.”

The creature reached out to the coin purse. It counted the coins in the bag

before it nodded. Then it spoke. The grey mouth opened and raspy words came out. "If the Watcher asks and pays the price then I will do what you desire." Then it opened its mouth even wider and just slide the coin pouch into its mouth, swallowing it.

Then it picked up the folder, flicking it open with its long gray fingers. It read over the first page. "I think I understand. Anything else you need me to know?"

"The man listed there will be here later today. He will spend some time training downstairs. If you need his help speak with him. He is also aware of the plan."

The creature nodded, "Understood."

With that Matt left the creature and the shed. He had done all the preparation that he was capable of doing. He returned home. Then he relaxed and laid down on a couch. He had the old book out and was rereading it.

Matt drifted off to sleep on the couch.

While he slept Mari, Bluebird, and Buck arrived at the apartment. However when she saw Matt sleeping on the couch she shooed them out of the apartment. She smiled at him as she quietly shut the door and left him to his sleep.

Chapter 7: The End

Matt woke to the sound of his alarm. He fumbled, surprised. His alarm was not next to him. He stumbled across the room to the next room where he alarm was beeping. He was now more or less awake. A coffee and breakfast were the next step. Once he had eaten and sipped at his coffee he finally felt mostly awake.

Today was the day. He continued to relish the moment of sipping on the coffee. But soon enough the cup was empty. He packed up his box of miniatures. He hadn't used many of them so far but today he expected to need them all.

He did make sure the his other new model was packed away along with all his previous models. It could be considered an army and indeed parts of it actually were an army. Their opponent was a powerful mage and he while he had many ideas for dealing with a mage the real risk was the Night King or its avatar. Matt didn't know how much of his models would be needed to defeat it,

if that was even possible.

He took the case with him as he drove out to the Old Gizzard Caves. They had arranged to meet at a location not far from the caves. It was a ways outside of the city, up in the mountains. There was a small nearby diner, one mostly serving the local town but there were often visitors to the caves and other nearby places that also ate there.

Matt was the first to arrive and he took a place in the diner. After not too long he got to see Estefania enter the establishment. She 'walked' instead of floating but it was the most awkward walk that Matt had ever seen. To his eyes she was very clearly still floating and making a passible attempt as preventing to walk. Matt actually wondered if she was actually capable of walking or if that was one of the costs of her magic.

She waved to him as she got closer and Matt was pretty certain that there was actually an inch under her feet and she was just pretending to walk on the air. She slipped into the booth along with him. Her pretending to obey gravity was a little bit more convincing now that she was partially underneath the table.

She also quickly flagged down the waiter and ordered some pancakes.

"Do you like sweet things?" Asked Matt casually.

"I love sweet things." She said with a giddy smile, "Pancakes, cakes, cookies, all of them. But... I can't eat too much of them. It is very sad." She did sound a little bit sad at it.

"Because your flight magic prevents you from burning many calories?" Asked Matt.

"Oh... smart guess. Yeah, that is it." She smiled at him, "Mostly I don't have to worry about it but some things are side effects. And one of those is that I can't eat too much. But sometimes I like to treat myself."

"Like when you might die fighting something?"

"Precisely. I can't eat if I die, so I might as well eat before I die." She sounded far too excited about pancakes for somebody that might actually die. When the server did bring the pancakes she overloaded them with syrup and began to eat them slowly, savoring each bite.

She was almost finished with the pancakes when the warriors showed up.

They were also in their normal form, without their signature armor. Although they each wore their color so Matt had no trouble figuring out which one was which. He was kinda surprised how closely they matched what had had imagined they would look like outside their armor.

They joined Matt and Estefania at the table. Green looked at Estefania with a suspicious eye and she sat/floated at the table. The others took their seat and also flagged down the server for some of their own orders. Matt also added some extra coffee to the order.

Red was big and brawny, "Alright everybody, I hope you are all prepared. The first step is going into the caves. It is possible there will be traps or enemies waiting for us. So we need to be ready for anything. I assume you all are?"

There was nodding from all around him.

"And Matt, you brought what you needed to? I felt some uncertainty about your part when discussing the plan before."

Matt tapped his case, "Yes, everything is good here. I have what I need right here." They looked at his box. They had seen it before but it always mysteriously vanished.

"Alright then. Did you have anything to add to the plan Estefania? You said you had something else you were planning?"

"Yup. Hopefully it won't matter." She said as she took the last bite of her pancakes. "I was serious when I talked about collapsing the caves. I don't want to do it but if it would prevent the Night King from destroying the city then I will do it." She almost looked serious for a second before she wiped her finger in the syrup and then sucked on it.

"Right." Said Red, "Well, we will do our best to avoid letting that happen. Will you be fighting with us against them?"

She nodded, "Yeah, but I'll avoid interfering until things are more risky. When Sri shows up I'll do my best to stop him. Until then I'll be keeping watch."

The server brought the food for everybody else. It was a hearty chicken-fried steak for Red. The others had ordered a good variety of breakfasts.

Blue got some sausages with eggs. Yellow got an omelette. Green just got

bacon and eggs. Matt had already had breakfast so he continued to just drink his coffee, this second of the day. They all did their best to enjoy their breakfast. Estefania clearly should have waited to eat because she looked envious of everybody else's meals.

Once the meal completed they began leaving together toward the cavern. Rather than drive separately they walked (with walked being a fakery in Estefania's case) the remainder of the way to the Old Gizzard Caves.

There was the tourist spot placed directly over the entrance to the cavern. Everybody stopped just in sight of the entrance. They looked over at the place. It was currently closed. "Shouldn't it be open?" Asked Blue as he looked over at the location.

"Privately rented for today." Estefania said. She was rising up a little bit, her walking pretend failing. "Doctor Amandeep rented it for the whole day. Both today and one the next two new moons as well."

"Do we know if there is anybody or anything inside there?" Asked Blue.

"Unknown." She said. "I don't know of anybody entering it but with magic that is hardly an actual answer. There are certainly no normal humans waiting for us in there."

"But there could be mages or monsters?" Asked Matt, "That was what I was expecting anyways." He closed his eyes, chanted the words, and the next moment there was a sword at Matt's hip and a dog by his side. He however wasn't wearing the armor from last time. Right now he was the spitting image of the painting showing him fighting the Night King.

"No armor?" Asked Red.

"No zombies today. If it is just magic then the armor just slows me down. I'll bring it out if it looks like I will need it." Then Matt knelt down next to the dog who was already getting pets. "Rocky, you ready? I need you to go see if there is anybody in that building." The dog nodded and then ran off toward the building. Her sniffed around outside the building before turning and looking at Matt.

"Looks like it is safe." Said Matt.

"Smart dog." Said yellow as she stared at the dog.

They moved across the street. "He is just signaling that nobody is directly inside preparing to ambush us. They could be farther in or there could be magic involved."

"Rocky can't detect magic?"

"He is a dog."

Estefania chipped in. "Usually mages forget to take into account scent because humans have a pretty bad sense of smell. So a dog could actually get past a lot of magical concealment."

"But he won't detect a magical bomb." Said Matt seriously. They all stopped just outside the door as Blue was about to open the door. He hesitated.

Matt pulled out an orb. It was a dark gray colored. "But I have this. It should detect magic."

Estefania stared at it skeptically, "It doesn't seem to be triggering off of me. And from what I know detecting magic is extremely difficult. Sure if the magic is extreme enough people can feel it but what we are mostly feeling is actually the change in natural phenomena." She was weird like this. Sometimes she was glaring enviously at somebody's food other times she knew precisely too much magical facts.

"Luckily our opponent is a very specific type of mage. Not just somebody that uses 'magic' but somebody that uses the classical thought of magic." Said Matt, "This is also designed to detect 'magic', maybe not the exact same kind of magic but that basic conception of magic. I'm not 100% certain that this will work but I believe the principles are sound."

Estefania looked at it, still suspicious. "Yes... I suppose that would be how it would work. If both you and Sri have the same basic conception of the type of magic then you would come to a consensus about how it would work. That is a big IF and also either party could have magical detection blocking. Magical interactions like this are some of the most complicated areas and the results can be extremely inconsistent."

"You heard her." Said Matt. "Don't just rely on my orb, keep your own eye out." He kept an eye on the orb and motioned to Blue to continue.

Blue still looked nervous as he pushed open the door. They stepped into the

lobby of the building. There was a place for buying tickets and a gift shop. They all moved in and shut the door behind them.

"Rocky, go see if there is anybody here." Said Matt and the dog ran off. The building was lit and there was nobody present they could see but Matt wanted the dog to check it out.

"Alright, let's change." Said Red.

They all pressed a button on the strange watch they were wearing. They raise the watch up high, then there was a flash of light and all five of them were wearing their armored jumpsuits and helmets.

Matt kept an eye out for anything unusual while keeping his orb in his view in case it lit up. Estefania had already left the floor completely now that the door was closed and was floating up at the ceiling.

"Do you think there is anybody here?" Matt asked.

She shrugged, "Perhaps. Or maybe they are waiting for us to take up a position."

Soon enough rocky returned. Matt scratched his ears. "Looks like there is nobody that Rocky could find. Let's go into the cavern. Had anybody been here before."

Blue raise his hand, "I have, but it has been multiple years. I think I remember the way though. Plus." He pointed towards the sign directing tourists.

"Sure, make it easy." Said Matt. Then they began walking there. The ticket counter was unmanned so they just walked past it and down the hallway. It led to a set of stairs that they took down. There was just a string of lights connected to the wall that led them down into the depths of the earth. They went deeper and deeper underground.

There were plaques on the wall talking about geological formation and how cave systems work. The water that passes through the earth causing stalactites and stalagmites. But still nothing else. They finally reached the bottom of the stairs and it opened up into the cave system. There was a path setup that they should follow along with a sign that said not to leave the path or touch anything.

Rocky already began running off, looking for anything that might be dangerous. And they followed him through the caves.

"Where here would the ritual take place?" Matt asked.

"Maybe anywhere, although a big open area would be preferred." Said Estefania.

They walked through the entire cavern to find it was completely empty.

"Looks like there actually is nobody here." Said Blue with relief in his voice.

"Don't relax too much." Said Green, "There still might be some trap setup."

Rocky was wandering around sniffing at things. This place definitely did not accept pets so there probably had not been any other dogs here before. Rock pillars, dripping water. Strange echos. This place was very unusual for a dog.

"And they could show up anytime tonight?" Asked Matt.

"Anytime after the sun sets to when the sun rises again." Said Estefania.

"Although it probably won't be near the end. The full ritual would probably take a couple of hours, I think. So like anytime between 9pm and 3am or thereabouts."

"Great. All night. And here we are in the early morning." Said Yellow, with a very annoyed tone."

"They could actually show up before that." Said Matt. "Just because the ritual needs the evening doesn't mean they can't show up early." There was disappointed groans from everybody as they finishing scouting the caves. The place was actually quite extensive but between all seven of them plus the dog they were able to search the entire place, confirming that it was empty of people.

"Well, it is empty. That is good at least." Said Red and he sat down on one of the benches. "Blue and Green, you go up stairs and keep an eye on the entrance to the place. If you see anybody at all run down here."

They nodded and went back up the stairs.

Matt have brought out his case and was taking some miniatures out of the box. Yellow peered over in curiosity and Estefania also drifted by and looked down at what Matt was doing.

"What are those?" Asked Yellow.

"Did you not see these before?" Asked Matt. "I have a miniature for Rocky. And there was also one for my sword. He then showed the small armor stand miniature. It contained a small replica of the armor he had worn when fighting

the necromancer.”

“You can turn things small?” Asked Yellow.

“Uhh... not exactly.” Matt scratched his head. “More like I can turn things large? And make them real? That is close enough to how my magic works.”

“How does that explain the space station?” She was examining some of the miniatures.

Matt brought out the small space station replica. They were inside it so they probably wouldn’t recognize it just by looking at the outside. “I have it here. I suppose you could also say that I can make people small.... although that isn’t quite right. It isn’t that you were inside this miniature, more that I moved you to the real location that is represented by this piece.”

“There is a real space station like that?”

Matt shrugged, “Don’t ask me. It is magic. She is the expert.” He pointed up to Estefania who was spinning around in the air. The cave was kind cramped but she still managed to find the largest areas to do funny movements in.”

“It is an extra area. Like the necromancer crypt. Sort of real, sort of not. Basically brought to life by the magic but once the place exists it basically continues to exist.”

“So, now there is a space station out there with a giant monster hiding in the vents? When before there wouldn’t have been?” Asked Yellow.

Estefania nodded, “Yeah, more or less. There are extra places all over. Sometimes they turn into normal places if enough people believe in them. They can also just completely disappear if not enough people continue to care to remember it.”

Matt paused while unloading some of the other miniatures, “Are normal places really any different? Could they be forgotten about and disappear?”

Estefania shrugged, “Who knows. People wouldn’t remember even if it happened. That is kinda how this works. There are all kinds of records of places disappearing but whether those were extra places is completely unknown.”

Matt muttered softly, “If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is there, does it even exist.”

Red shouted from farther away, “Stop philosophizing and finish whatever

preparation you have.” He too had a box that he had brought with him. He was fiddling with knobs and dials on the box. He then pressed a button at the whole thing began transforming. It turned into a turret with a big funny looking gun attached to it.

“Ohhh...” Said Estefania as she drifted toward it. “That is a nice gun turret.”

Red nodded, “Yes it is. It is one of the inventions that the professor left for us. We can’t really replace it but we also can’t replace the city. So I decided to bring it out. It has been a while since I have gotten a chance to use it.”

Yellow sighed, “If only the vehicles still worked. Those would have been great against the undead.”

Matt looked at the sci-fi looking turret. This professor was the magical source for the warriors and it was clear what some of his inspirations were. Matt couldn’t replace that, but he might be able to repair some of these things. Well Matt couldn’t but he knew some wild characters that could.

But that was a question for later. Right now Matt had collected twelve different miniatures. Matt hid those minis around the cavern. He then placed them in concealed locations around the cavern. Once that was done he took the most important remaining mini. It was the new mini that he had painted two days ago.

It was a brown furry looking creature, except it was bipedal and carrying a pickaxe. It also had a mining cap on. Matt closed his eyes and when he opened them the furry creature was in front of him. They stared at each other for a moment and then both of them nodded.

“Snagglefoot. I have called you here to request your aid.” Said Matt with all seriousness.

The furry creature nodded and its funny nose moved up and down. It looked more or less like a bipedal mole wearing a miner’s outfit. Matt leaned in and whispered instructions to Snagglefoot so that nobody else could tell what he was saying to it.

When Matt leaned out the creature nodded once again and then dove at the floor. It burrowed directly into the stone beneath it, disappearing underground. It

was like nothing had happened there, smooth stone still stood where it had just burrowed through.

"What was that thing?" Asked Green who wandered over after the creature disappeared.

"A mole person. Like with Rocky, I wanted to have some extra detection methods that the opponent is very unlikely to be able to detect. Any underground creature is more likely to go unnoticed than many other options."

Green eyed Matt curiously. "That seems particularly well suited for our exact situation."

"Yup." Said Matt. He had turned to walk away but paused, "Although, I suppose you wanted an explanation? Like I told yellow, my miniatures are capable of becoming what they represent. But those miniatures have to come from somewhere. So I just acquired a new one, one appropriate for what we are trying to accomplish."

"And you can just acquire them that easily?"

"Easily?" Said Matt. He paused. Sure, relatively speaking just purchasing a new model and painting it to acquire new magic was easy. But that wasn't all that was required to bring Snugglefoot into existence. You couldn't just bring someone like him into existence, no, there was much much more to it. But that was something that Matt only vaguely understood. All he could response was, "I wouldn't say it was easy. Much like Sri's magic to bring the Night King into this world can only work here and now, new miniatures requires specific conditions to bring to life for the first time. I was just able to make that happen here and now."

"I... see. Well, a digging creature like that will be able to help. We have also noticed you placing some more miniatures hidden around, are those part of the trap?"

Matt nodded. "Yes, but there is a limit to how many I can activate at the same time. Our limited environment did limit what type of creature I can bring into existence, but they should be able to turn the tide if are being overwhelmed."

"Another backup plan?"

Matt nodded, "The less our opponent knows about our true forces the better."

“Understood. But what kind of backup should we expect? Red would be angry if you left something out by accident.”

Matt signed, Green was right. So he explained what his support could do. Once that was done there was very little to do but to wait.

And wait everybody did. While it had been possible that foes would attack before night fell that was just a possibility. A possibility that didn't come to fruition. So time passed until the sun slowly began to fall beneath the horizon. Once the last rays of light disappeared beneath the horizon everybody knew, it would soon be time.

They gathered in the cavern except for two who were keeping watch. The tension filled everybody, this was the time where the city could fall. Matt could feel his limbs shaking. He was beginning to feel sick. The possibility of failure was like a poison that he was fighting to keep free from. He had freed himself from that specter due to Estefania and Mari, but should the city be destroyed he didn't know if he would ever be able to recover even if he did survive.

He took some deep breaths trying to relax. Then the earth next to him shifted. A helmeted head appeared next to him. Matt leaned down to place his own head right next to Snagglefoot. After listening the creature disappeared again back into the earth.

“It looks like it is time.” Said Matt, determination reaching his voice. “We have people incoming. Eight by Snagglefoot's count. He thinks at least four of them are monstrous types just because of their size and weight.”

Blue gulped, “Eight is a lot. And four monsters?” He glanced around, “We can beat that right?”

Estefania shifted in the air, “Sri is the main target. As long as he can be eliminated the others do not matter.”

Red said, “We have all the preparation we can. Blue, go get Green and Yellow. We need everybody here.” His voice was commanding. This was the time for him to be his group's leader. Blue immediately began running for the stairs. Red meanwhile moved over to the turret that had been setup.

“Four monsters and four wizards.” Said Matt. “That is a lot.”

“We can do it.” Said Estefania. “We have you by our side Matt. With you

anything is possible.”

Matt shook his head, “You say that but I’m not certain where that confidence comes from.”

Estefania paused in the sky. There was a moment of fear in her face. A scrunching of features that Matt had never before seen in her. But a moment later the look was gone. She was smiles again, “You can do it Matt. I believe in you because I know that you can do it.”

Matt slapped his face. “Alright. Let’s do this.” There was a moment and then he was wearing the armor. Green and Yellow arrived and they were prepared for the assault.

Blue took position on the turret. On either side of the entrance was Red and Green. Yellow and Matt were a bit farther back. And Estefania was keeping an eye on everything from farther behind.

They thought they were prepared for the assault. But it was more dangerous than they had imagined. Black Fog began seeping down the stairs. Everybody dodged backward uncertain of the danger of the fog.

It swirled around the cave walls. Then it pushed forward engulfing the entire cavern. Immediately everything was completely dark. Matt couldn’t see anything at all. Even his own limbs were completely invisible to him in the darkness. Then he heard the roar of a terrible beast.

Matt chanted the words “We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence.” In what was darkness before now was the lantern that Matt had carried into the undead crypt. It cast away the shadows revealing everybody.

It also revealed the moment that the monsters crashed down the stairs and into Red and Green. Had the light come a moment later the two of them wouldn’t have been able to defend themselves. But they saw the shape of the monster emerge from the darkness.

The sharp barks of the turret also began to shoot. Peppering the monsters with bullets. The tentacled monstrosity that had appeared at Matt’s apartment was there. Along with something that seems to just be a blob of slime in almost human form.

Matt tossed up the lantern which was caught by Estefania. She wasn't making her own move but she happily took the lantern, freeing up Matt to help. He was about to join them when he paused, barks permeated the air and Matt turned to find a creature made of pure shadow rising up next to him. The light of the lantern did nothing to dismiss the creature.

Matt sliced at it with his sword but the blade just cut through the air like it was nothing. But then when the creature swiped at Matt he was sent crashing backward into one of the stalagmites. He pulled himself to his feet, trying to think of what might work against a creature like that.

"Estefania, throw the lantern at that monster." Yelled Matt. She did as he commanded and the lantern came crashing down. It shattered and the brilliant light engulfed the monster. Matt ran toward it and brought his sword down into the light. A scream echoed from within the darkness and then the darkness from all around them disappeared.

He breathed out for a moment and turned to see how the others were doing. There were now three monsters in the entrance way being fought by the three colored warriors. Blue was still firing into the monsters. They seemed to be doing fine even though some giant bear like monster had joined the fray. Red was Mano-e-manoing the bear.

So Matt instead scanned the room, this was the monsters but there was still Sri and the other mages to deal with. And he was right to be worried. They had not been there a second ago but now the four mages stood in the center of the main chamber, exactly where they believed the ritual should take place in.

Matt once more closed his eyes and chanted "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." It was time for his assistants to join in. Green skinned goblins burst out from hiding. These weren't the mostly unarmed and unarmed goblins others imagined these were wicked looking monsters with sharp metal weapons and leather armor.

They rushed at the mages with their weapons. Clearly one of the mages did not expect it and he was dragged from the group by the goblins. It was after that a chant from the dark robed leader caused a wall of fire to encircle the mages.

He began chanting some ominous spell immediately afterward. Now thought was Estefania's time to strike. A ball flew through the air as Sri. It was on a collision course with the mage when rocky arms burst out of the ground to catch the ball. The ball broke through those arms and was about to hit Sri when another mage jumped in the way. He sent the ball off course but was also sent hurling through the wall of fire.

Whatever that spell was was bad news. Matt knew that. So he ran toward Sri. He had to jump through the wall of fire. He felt the intense heat, the flames licking him. I burned him, he found feel the pain mostly on his skin and the growing feeling of pain from all over from his now red hot armor.

He was about to bring his sword down on Sri when the last apprentice mage began to grow, turning into a second tentacled monstrosity. It grabbed Matt. Matt cut through the tentacles, freeing himself from the monster. His sword was glowing red hot and Matt could feel the pain from everywhere but he brought the sword down onto the monster, cutting it in half.

But the time spend dismembering the monster took too long. Sri had finished his chant. There was a shaking of the entire underground cavern. Then the robe of Sri ripped open and an eye emerged. Tendrils began to pour out of the tattered remains of the cloak.

It was here, the thing they had hoped they would have needed to fight. The avatar of the Night King. More eyes opened, the squid-like form was not complete.

"YoU TrYeD TO StOp ME To NO AvAiL. I WiLl EaT!" Screamed the voice of the monster. Matt tried standing desperately in front of it. But the pain from the heated armor was getting too much.

"Ah shit." Was all Matt could say. He raised his sword and motioned with his other hand. The fall of flames had started fading when the avatar was born. The goblins rushed in from all sides. The tendrils burst out in all directions, grabbing all the goblins surrounding it.

Matt attempted to use that time when the avatar was distracted to rush in. His sword went directly toward the eye in the center of the creature's face. But the

goblins were not as numerous as the tendrils and one of the wrapped around his sword. Matt attempted to twist the sword and cut the tendril. The sword was beginning to cut when another tendril reached out and wrapped around the hilt, stopping the blade.

All Matt could do was release the blade and jump back to avoid getting grabbed by even more tendrils. Around him the goblins were being swished by the constricting force of the tendrils.

"Estefania!" Matt called out.

She was already active. Five ball like bullets flew through the air directly at the avatar. They pierced through the monster in four different places. It screamed with terrible multiple voices. But it kept moving. The wounds bubbled and began to heal. It was also continuing to wriggle forward.

Matt had moved back as far as he could. It was where he had kept his case. He called out "We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence." Around him appeared a squad of knights along with a horde of skeletons. It was an unlikely combination.

Matt's head began to swim. He knew he was supposed to keep the number of summoned things down but this was an emergency. He staggered. Not only did his head hurt but his body felt like it was on fire, he didn't know how badly he had been burned but it was best not to question that at this point.

The Knights and Skeletons charged the monster in front of him. A figure in a black robe also stood next to Matt. In the badly lit underground you could not make out his face but Matt knew the monster that dwelled inside.

Matt coughed out, "Cast whatever you can to stop that. The more dangerous the better. I'll hold it off as long as I can."

The creature croaked, "if you remain when the spell finishes you will die. get out before it finishes."

Matt didn't even nod. He just joined the knights and skeletons against the horror of eyes and tendrils. This time his goal wasn't to kill the monster, it was just to delay it as long as he could. During his summoning a new weapon had appeared in his hands. A massive axe. Matt used it to cut through tendrils. He prioritized cutting tendrils that were binding his creatures so that they would not

get crushed and continue to fight.

Even with the numbers it seemed hopeless. No matter how many tendrils were cut, more sprouted from the monster. Wounds on the thing healed almost as fast as the were inflicted. Estefania had ran out of particularly dangerous objects and was just throwing the crushed remains of goblins and broken stalagmites at the monster.

Their numbers didn't dwindle, they got cut down ruthlessly. For each creature that Matt could save with his axe two were crushed by tendrils. As it bore down on Matt, a scream came from one side. Red slammed into the side of the avatar, knocking it to the side. The other warriors had their funny looking guns out and were shooting it.

Matt didn't know how those guns worked but the almost laser bolts that they shot were at least slowing down the monster. Finally they were pushing the monster back. Matt could step forward and free another creature. They were still dying but now with the extra aid they were lasting much longer.

Another step forward. More freed. Now they were no longer dying. Matt's internal timer began to ring and he shouted. "Fall Back. Quickly!"

They listened. The remaining skeletons sacrificed themselves to left them pull back to let Matt's robed ally finish the spell. A black ray shot from the finger of the creature. It shot across the room and struck the avatar. There was a black explosion and a wash of silence that hit them. Matt tagged back and fell down to one knee. He was almost completely spent.

Then Green ruined it. "Haha! Take that you monster. Look who is laughing now."

Even Matt knew that was bad luck. And when the darkness cleared he was only proven right. The monster had a black scorched hole in it but the skin around it bubbled and boiled. Then it repaired itself. The creature twisted and turned. Then it began moving again.

Red and the others attacked it again but Matt had troubled standing. All he could do was think. "How... how can we kill it?" Was all he could ask.

Estefania was there. She was in the air, looking down at him, almost expectantly.

He looked up at her, "How?"

"I don't know. Only you can know that."

"But... I..." His voice was pained, "I don't know."

She looked disappointed. Her eyes were beginning to fill with tear. "Please Matt, do it. I believe in you."

He looked back at the carnage. Another knight was being strangled by the monster. Blue's right arm was dangling limply from one side and Red was standing in front of him. His jumpsuit armor was slashed in many places from the tendrils with claws on the ends.

Matt couldn't keep fighting. It seems that this was the limit of being fair. "Do it. Drop the mountain."

"No... you can think of a solution. I can't bear to do it again."

Matt thought that was some odd words. "This is the solution. Do it."

Her eyes were tearing up. Then she finally nodded. "I'm sorry Matt. I couldn't stop it. Next time for sure." The strange glowing lines surrounded her, making a circle surrounding her entirely. The next moment she had vanished. There was a strong rumbling. The caverns shook.

Matt coughed and collapsed to the ground. All he could do now was call out to his last hope. "Do it." Then the cavern collapsed.

Chapter 8: Together Once More

It was the main that brought Matt back to consciousness. All over his body he could feel the pain. Like everything was screaming at him. He opened his eyes to stare upward. It was white... like plaster. He focused and groaned as he leaned upward.

Then an annoyed voiced called out to him, "Stay down." He fell back down when the person the voice came from got up to him and pushed him back down.

"Ouch Mari. That hurts."

"I'm sure it does. Some idiot is completely covered in burns. Not to mention those burns were covered with turn when their mole friend dragged everybody away to safety."

"Snagglefoot did good." Said Matt. Although he did have trouble speaking.

There was just too much pain everywhere. "Do you know what happened to the avatar?"

Mari sighed, "That is what you are worried about? Geez. But I don't know. From what I can tell the mountain collapsed onto the creature. Do you think that will kill it?"

"If I say yes will magic make it true?"

"Do you believe it enough?" She said flatly.

Matt groaned, "More likely magic will make sure the creature survived. I'm pretty sure watching media makes fighting monster harder."

"Now shut up and lay down."

"The others?"

"Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow have already woken up. They have pretty bad injuries but yours are the worst." She placed a miniature next to him. "If you think you can, that one would be extremely helpful."

Matt looked over at the miniature. "Saint Cyan? Do I have to?"

"No. You can remain bedridden for who knows how long instead and let the definitely surviving monster destroy the city." Her sarcasm was biting.

"Don't you have some other magic friend that can heal?"

"Stop trying to weasel out of it. Anybody I would ask would be very very annoyed if they learned that you could do it but didn't."

Matt looked like he had eaten a lemon. "Well, I guess my bodily suffering is probably worse than her. Probably." After he closed his eyes and said the words the woman had appeared by his side.

She was dressed in pure white. And she had the smuggest expression you could possibly imagine on her face. "Oh dear, oh dear. Whatever happened to you Mr Matt? You seem to be suffering quite a bit." She reached out and brushed her hand against his burns. That caused him to flinch in pain.

Matt kept his cool as much as he could, "Wall of fire mostly. Plus a big monster that I think broke a few bones." He wheezed again. He felt it was likely that he had broken a few ribs. "Do you think you could heal me and my friends up?"

"If you say please."

"Please."

"Pretty Please."

Matt ground his teeth, "Pretty please."

"Beg for it."

"Just shut up and heal me."

"Ohhh, how feisty. Well, I suppose you did say pretty please so I guess I can heal you. But if you were to say it again, and kindly, I might be more inclined to be quick."

Matt summoned up his kindest, nicest voice. "Pretty please can you heal me."

"How very nice of you to ask." She raise a staff above his body and chanty. "May the cleansing light of our fairest lady cleanse your wounds and refresh your body."

Maybe Matt should have not asked for it to be quick. The healing hurt, a lot. His body itched and contorted as burned flesh reformed and broken bones moved back into position. It wasn't the clean perfected healing of pretty magic. It was forcing everything back into the way it was meant to be.

"You bi...." Matt was about to yell but Mari stared at him harshly. Matt gritted his teeth, "Thank you Saint Cyan." Not that it was over there was no pain anywhere, just the lingering memories of absolute torment just seconds ago. "Now if you could kindly do the same treatment to my friends, I'm sure they will also appreciate it."

"Oh, I'm sure they would." She said gleefully.

When she left Matt cursed softly, "How a sadist like her got made a Saint is beyond me." He grumbled to himself.

Mari had taken the seat next to Matt, "Alright Matt, tell me what happened. I know from what the others said that you fought the avatar and failed to win. But they don't seem to know what happened to Estefania there at the end and Snagglefoot did not bring her with everybody else."

"Mari... can magic let you time travel?"

She blinked a few times. "Uhh... I don't think so."

"Are you sure?"

She shook her head, "No I'm not certain. There has been some discussion

about this. The consensus is that time travel probably doesn't exist but if it did exist it would be nigh-impossible to accomplish."

"Why so?"

"The idea is that to time travel your believe would need to be so strong that it overwhelmed the combined believe of everybody else in the world. They believe in this world, this time, and they don't want it to change. So you would be resisting the collective belief of everybody else to accomplish it. Assuming it was possible at all."

Matt scratched his chin. Things that Estefania said at the end was odd. Like she was doing to be doing this again. Also that painting by the Lady of many Estefania's and many Matts. He had thought about it and wondered if time travel could really be the solution.

"Can you hear my idea out." He said.

She shrugged but let him speak.

"Assuming that resistance is why it doesn't work then it would mean it might be possible if you avoided that resistance. If you only went back in time a short amount that would limit how much you could change. If you only went back a week or two for example, sure there would be changes but most people probably have anything major change."

"But there still would be a lot of people who did. Sure, that would probably lessen the resistance but I don't think that would be enough."

"Now, imagine there was some terrible tragedy, something so horrific that everybody wished it never happened."

"Your saying the destruction of the city by the Night King would weaken this resistance enough that it would be able to go back a couple of weeks and try again?" She paused to consider that.

"Yeah, that is what I am saying. A bunch of what Estefania has done has been odd. Like she knew me. And that she failed again. If this is something she had tried multiple times that would explain a lot of her oddness."

"Alright, sure, for the sake of argument I'll accept that this situation might be sufficient to allow time travel. Then why are we still here?"

"Mari disappeared in the caves but I don't think the time travel has happened yet. If my speculation is true the resistance would still be too high. The city is still intact, she would need to wait until the majority is destroyed before the magic would work."

"Another issue, wouldn't the outside work be enough resistance to prevent this from happening? This is just one city after all."

"Possibly, but I think if you did it right then the outside world wouldn't notice or be affected. If you did that right it would make the weight of the wishes here more impactful than the wishes outside. But this is all still just speculation, maybe this is more like The Lady where Estefania has a second magic that lets her experience a bunch of possible futures and she just thinks she had met me."

Mari sighed, "Regardless, we still have to this city. We want to avoid this right?"

"Of course. This avatar still needs to be dealt with and the cavern falling on it is only a delay. While the summoning was technically a failure that monster was beyond what me and the others were able to fight normally. Is Curtis ready?"

Mari nodded, "As is Tecla. Everybody tried to convince her not to join but she insisted. I've also heard back from Sheldon. He was surprised and happy to hear from me but there isn't anyway he will be able to join us in time. He said he is going to start heading over but the unless the avatar takes a few days to dig itself out then he will just have to do it without him."

"I'm not too surprised about either of their responses. And once we have made a decision about what to do can you forward that to Frey."

"But he said he wouldn't help."

"Yeah he did. But at the very end it will need to be his decision not mine."

"Ah... alright, I'll continue to pass along what we are doing to him. I still don't expect him to show up."

As they continued Saint Cyan pranced into the room. She looked radiant... far too radiant. "They have all been healed. They were so happy they they shouted that hospital prices were preferable to this. It makes me happy to heal people like that."

Matt groaned, "You didn't need to come back. You could have just

disappeared off to magically fairy tale world."

She eyed him, "What are you planning Trickster? You called not just me but some of my knights as well. Before you always came to me, never before have you called me or mine to another world. I didn't even know you could do it until now."

Matt's eyes sharpened. "I have interfered with your world before. But now the place that I live is under threat. So I have asked many others for aid."

"Your strange friends seem to think that I am some kind of summon of yours." She looked a bit annoyed. "Is that all that you think about our relationship?"

Matt looked over at Mari for help but she raised her hands, "Don't look at me. This is your fire."

He looked back at Saint Cyan, "This is the world that I come from. And in this world magic is based off belief in things. And I believe that I can transmit people and things between worlds."

"I feel like you were much more powerful when you were coming to my aid. Apparently here you just fought with a sword against some monster. That sounds like a pretty easy opponent from what you did in my world."

Matt laughed a little and when put on a little smile, "Perhaps it is. But I was never the fighter there. Here neither. I left that to other people."

"Oh?" She looked at him with a cocked eyebrow, "Then this is some elaborate ruse by the trickster?"

"People always look much more into my schemes than is correct." He said, "Have I managed to beat the monster then that would have been it. Now I have to complete my actual plan."

Her eyes narrowed then she turned, "I just remembered that I have somewhere to be."

"But I need your help more. Do you want me to beg?"

She paused. "Oh.... You naughty boy." She had her own cruel smile. "You do know how to temp a girl."

"I'll owe you whatever you want if you aid me. Please Saint Cyan, I need your help."

"You'll even lick my boots?"

"Anything." He sounded serious.

"Alright, I'll aid you. But I will make you pay for it. Now what is it you want me to do." Matt explained what he desired from her. She looked a little disappointed but nodded in agreement. "Fine, I'll do that. I do though kinda feel sorry for this monster."

Mari shook her head as Saint Cyan left. "Matt, I'm going to go help Curtis and Tecla get ready. But I do have one last thing to say. I don't think that there is time travel involved."

Matt looked at her curiously, "Why do you say that?"

"Because that would involve a timeline where you lose. And you only lose when that is what you desire. You are far too sneaky and underhanded to fail to defeat something like a monstrous avatar." Then she turned and left, leaving Matt alone with his thoughts.

"That kinda hurts you know." He muttered to himself. That was a flaw in that chain of logic. Perhaps there were timelines where Matt remaining an office worker and never got involved. Those could have played out very differently. But if Matt had broken free from his own chains of sadness, maybe it was prideful, but he also didn't think he would lose. At least not to something like the avatar.

He shook his head. "I still don't have an adequate explanation for Estefania. Maybe she is just insane, that wouldn't be too out of character for her. Or maybe there is something wrong about my conception of how magic works. After all my magic seems to violate some of the rules that she told me about."

He slapped his face, "Although, enough pondering. It is time to actually fight an avatar and win." He left the room and found Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow in a nearby room. They were still mentally removing from Saint Cyan's treatment.

"Hello! Are you all feeling better after your treatment?"

Green knelt on the ground, "I'll never complain about eating my vegetables ever again."

Yellow was just staring off into space.

Matt clapped his hands together to attract their attention, "Sorry to bother

you all but there is something important we need to discuss. While I managed to get us all out before the cavern collapsed, it is my firm belief that the avatar survived the collapse. While we avoided the worst possible scenario there is still a potentially city destroying avatar attempting to free itself."

Red shook his head to clear his own mind before looking seriously at Matt. "What about Estefania? We were under her command previously."

"I don't know. I'm planning on heading over to the manor after this but I'm not expecting to find her there. And I don't think we should delay planning just because we can't find her."

He clearly didn't look happy about it but eventually nodded, "Understood. Are you trying to take command then?"

"Yes."

He grunted, looked annoyed, and then finally said, "Fine. It sounds like you have something of a plan, let us hear it and then I'll decide whether or not we will go along with it. And it had better be good... and you had better tell us all of it."

"Alright, I'll tell you what I have planned. The short explanation is that I have been recruiting some old friends to help out. I think you have already met Mari. There are also a couple of extras that will be joining us, one in particular is a fighter who is about as strong as you Red. With his and Mari's aid, I'm going to move more to the back line and use my magic to assist."

Matt then outlined the larger portion of the plan to them. When he was done Red considered, finally he said, "Alright. We are up for it. Plus you mentioned something about an engineer that you thought could repair some of our stuff? And this isn't like that mad healer who patched us up right?"

"No, he knows what he is doing. Your kind of pseudo-tech is exactly his wheelhouse. And don't let Saint Cyan heal you say that about her, she will just make sure the healing is more thorough next time. I did mention that she will be joining the expedition as the designated healing didn't I?" They all shuttered but kept their opinions to themselves.

"He will be here soon."

"Uh.." Blue raised his hand, "Where is here? I'm getting the feeling of

excessive magic.”

“Oh, right.” Said Matt. “This is a magical defensive structure that I put up. It is hidden inside a shed in a park. There is a ladder down the hall that will lead you up into a local park. Just make sure to keep track of where you leave the hedge from. Otherwise you might not be able to find this place again.”

Blue shook his head, “Your magic really is impressive. How much you can change with it. And your summons. That healer is one of them too right?”

Matt shook his head, “I recommend not calling them that. I’m not certain how summoners actually work but my magic is a bit different. As far as I know I just pluck them out of their world and bring them here. So ‘summoning’ might be the correct term but I’m not in control of them any more than I am in control of you. So if you make Saint Cyan angry there isn’t anything I can do about it.”

Red shook his head, “I’m not the expert on magic. That was Estefania. So I can’t comment on that. But magic is about belief, so what you believe about your magic is the most important. At the very least we can consider it a drawback of your magic. Alright then, I’ll gather some of our broken equipment and bring it here. I hope this engineer is here by the time I return. Everybody, join me, we have a lot of equipment to bring over.”

Matt watched them leave. That was one step done. The next was visiting the mansion that Estefania had been at. He wondered what it was that he would find there.

He drove over to the manor. The gate didn’t open automatically for him. So he had to get out in the driveway. The gate was slightly ajar so Matt just pushed his way into the driveway. The place looked the same as when he had last been here but there was a quiet over the whole place. Matt hadn’t be here before without Estefania being there.

Matt found the front door open as well. He walked through the hallways, finding the rooms empty of people. He walked until he returned to the room where the Lady painted. When he entered she was not there but all the paintings were. All of them loomed ominously on the walls. A threat that Matt needed to finish saving the city.

He stared up at the paintings. Was it really time travel that Estefania was involved in. Matt was trying to untangle the possibilities. But Estefania wasn't here and Matt didn't know where to find her.

There was a knocking sound and Matt turned toward the doorway. There, standing in the doorway, was The Lady.

"Oh, you're still here." Said Matt, "Estefania disappeared. Do you know where she has gone off to?"

The Lady shook her head. She was pushing a large cart that looked like it could move paintings.

"So you don't know where she is either. Her collapse of the cavern is delaying the avatar long enough for me and Red's group to reorganize and make another attempt at it. You want to join?"

The Lady shook her head.

"No problem. I know that fighting isn't really your capability. Any extra visions about our success."

She pointed at the painting that she had been working on since Matt had met her. He moved up to it and looked at it. It was splotchy, full of red and black. A face that looked like it was in terror.

"Failure? Is that what you see." Asked Matt.

She just stared at him before eventually shrugging.

"Well, if you see Estefania, you can tell her that I survived. We are going to make an attempt at the avatar sometime very soon. As soon as it breaks free from the underground we want to be there. Given its nocturnal summoning conditions we are going to assume it will break free at night. Estefania can join us at my apartment. If she shows up can you tell her that."

The Lady nodded.

"Alright then. Take care. If we end up surviving I'll let you know, but I guess you will already know when the city is no longer in danger."

She nodded again.

Matt left. The Lady began loading up some of her paintings on the trolley as he passed her. He walked back through the manor. Eventually ending up outside. He walked back through the gates and got into his car. He leaned over to

the passenger side door and pushed it open. A furry form crawled into the car.

The door shut again and Matt drove off. Once he was far away from the manor and back into the city he pulled over to one side. He then leaned over and Snagglefoot whispered something in his ear.

Matt nodded, "Thanks." Then Matt began driving again. He stopped near where the Old Gizzard caves used to be located. He let Snagglefoot out of the car. He then passed over a phone to Snagglefoot who looked at it. If a Mole could look annoyed this would be how they looked. "Just press the emergency call button and I'll get the message."

The moleman took the phone and shoved it into the small bag he carried. He then dug into the ground and disappeared. Matt needed him to give them advanced notice before the avatar broke free. Once Snagglefoot had disappeared into the ground Matt drove back to the park. He still had some more things he needed to do.

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As soon as the sun began to rise in the morning Matt yawned in relief. He was still pretty certain that the avatar would only break out during the night. Nothing this night so he collapsed on the bed to get some sleep.

He was very glad that nothing had happened the first night. It would have been more sketchy since it had only been one day since the cavern collapsed. He drifted into sleep almost immediately.

His dreams were filled with darkness and screams. Falling buildings and terrified people. He found himself face to face with the sinister version of himself. The black suit of his other self blended with the darkness of the world.

"If anybody will destroy this world it will be me. After all, this world and every world are my toys. Let them know that I am the Trickster here." The voice was hard, cruel. Matt watched the man but could do nothing. After all Matt was just a small child playing with little toys in a sandpit.

He woke up to the blaring sound of his alarm. Matt groaned and leaned up. He regretted setting the alarm but he knew that he needed it. Even though it was now in the afternoon, Matt did his normal morning routine. Breakfast and Coffee.

He was enjoying the comfort of his apartment. It was nice and quiet here, everybody else should be at the shed hideout. At least that is what he thought before his doorbell rang. He groaned went to open the door.

"Matt! Good morning!" It was the energetic voice of Curtis. Behind him was the black hair woman, Telca. She waved at Matt from behind Curtis. Besides both of them was Mari.

"Morning..." Then Matt began to shut the door on them.

Curtis however shoved his foot in the doorway. "Come on bro. Let us in. I wanted us to have a little friend time before all the serious stuff happens. I brought some snacks." Matt looked at the chips and dip that Curtis had brought.

"Not even beer?"

"You wound me. We can have that after we defeat the monster."

"Alright, come in. It has been a while since we just hung out." Matt stepped back and let them into his apartment. His place still looked pretty weird but they took their places around his table. Matt took a seat as well. He still had some of his coffee so he offered some, "You want some coffee as well?"

They nodded and Matt poured them some coffee. When he last knew them they would much younger so he didn't know how much sugar or cream they would want. So instead he just placed those on the table for them to add themselves.

"It is nice to see you again Tecla. It has really been awhile. I'm sorry you had to be involved in this."

She looked sideways, almost nervously. She almost reached out to grab Curtis but she stopped and avoided grabbing onto him. It looks like she really had gotten a little bit more grown up.

"It is good to see you again too Matt. Although I too would have preferred a less dangerous reunion. But I can't pretend that this isn't happening. I think if I just up and left instead of joining you I would never forgive myself. So I am her."

Matt looked down at his own cup. "Yeah, well, I'm glad you joined. I'm sorry there isn't more of us for this reunion. But this will have to do." He hesitated for a moment, "Do you think you can tell me what all of you have been doing since I left?"

He listened as they spoke. All the experiences that they had while he was gone. The lives that they had led. Matt wanted to step in and tell them what he had been doing... but there was nothing to tell. He had been wasting away, better for him to look to the future then to dwell on the past. He smiled as he listened to Curtis wax poetically about being a father and how much he cared about his daughter.

Mari had become a teacher for younger kids. Curtis and Tecla owned a small handyman business. Curtis said that he had gotten into that but then people kept asking him for help so he eventually started a business around it. Tecla helped with the business, quitting her previous job so that she could spend more time at home.

It all sounded pretty nice. Matt questioned what he should do in the future. Even if he returned to his previous job things would be different. Matt now felt like he had a reason to live, not just survive. The problem was that he needed to make sure that the threat to the city was dealt with soon.

Matt laughed at another story that Curtis told about helping a couple that both had very different opinions about what to do. It was a fun story, silly. They spent a bit enjoying themselves. But soon enough the coffee was empty and the snacks were gone.

They all knew the time was coming. "Alright then. We should get going back to the shed. If we wait too long it will already be dark. We need to be prepared in case the avatar escapes today."

There were grim nods around the table and then they all stood up.

"Curtis will be there immediately. I'll be there before the sun sets." Said Tecla. She still seemed a bit nervous but the chat had loosened her up a little bit. She waved meekly as she left the room.

The rest left a bit slower. "Curtis, did your training go well?"

"Yeah, your buddy was a good training partner. And kinda scary if you ask me."

"Good, we are going to need you back in the game." They were almost to the elevator when Matt's phone rang. He pulled it out. "Shit." He answered it. Then a moment later, "Thanks. Avoid making contact."

He hung up the phone. "There is already movement underground."

"It isn't even dark yet." Said Mari. She looked a bit worried.

"Yeah, but we will need to get ready. We should go to the shed to gather everybody and then head directly over. Who knows when it is going to try and escape."

The trip back to the shed felt both too short and too long. They arrived and when people saw them enter everybody knew it was time.

"Red, how as the repairs been going?" Matt asked.

"Well enough. Your weird technician has been working on things. The vehicles are still not in operation but many of our other tools are in good shape. He even managed to reproduce the turret that was lost in the mine collapse from the semantics I brought."

"Excellent. Pack everything you can."

"Saint Cyan, are you and your knights ready?"

She nodded, "We are indeed. They are prepared to injure themselves in your service." That didn't sound quite correct to Matt but he wasn't about to correct her wording.

"Curtis, Mari?"

"We have what we need. I also called Tecla on the way over. Once she is done at home she will be joining us at the meeting site."

"Excellent." Said Matt. The thing he needed was his case of miniatures. He already had Saint Cyan and her knights but there were a few extra backup plans in the case. Previously they were stuck in a tight cave, this time he would have some more dangerous options.

Everything was packed up and trip began. It took them less than an hour to gather everything and head over to nearby Old Gizzard caves. As the cars stopped nearby, Matt stepped out of the car. Soon Snagglefoot was up next to him.

Matt leaned down to listen to him. When he stood up he said, "Alright, the opponent has been slowly moving toward the surface. However just minutes ago it stopped pretty close to the surface. I think it is waiting for sundown. We need to get ready quickly."

The turret was setup near the collapsed building for the tourist attraction for the cave. Saint Cyan stood back with Matt. On the front line was Red, Green, Yellow, and Mari as the Holy Knight Zanetha. Besides her was Grimkey, the Dragon Slayer. It was Curtis transformed. He didn't look like a knight in shining armor, more like a gruff mercenary with a heart of gold.

Behind them were Cyan's knights. They had fought the monster before. Had it not been for Matt's magic returning them to their own world if they became too injured along with Saint Cyan's healing they might have been dead. But they stood here ready to fight the nightmare again.

And even farther behind them were Matt and Saint Cyan. But they were waiting for one last person. She hurried up much later than everybody else. It was Tecla. After breathing hard for a moment she closed her eyes and then in a flash of light she had become Pilfol, the Unknowable. Her black hair was combined with a midnight black dress. It seems to sparkle in the night, like there were stars embroidered into the cloth.

"We are ready." She said. A weird quirk of Tecla. She always had been so nervous and timid but then when she got into her character she became somebody completely different. The mysterious Pilfol. As part of the bit she also used the royal we when referring to herself. A habit everybody else had found very cute.

Matt had nothing but the sword at his side and the case of miniatures. He had tried to fight the monster before and knew, it was beyond him. He needed to do what he did best. Which was be the trickster. So he stood there in the back and waited.

They did not have to wait very long. Not too long after the sun set beneath the horizon and the glow of the sun began to fade, that was when the rumbling began. Rocks tumbled from the pile. Then with a final crash the giant form of the avatar rose from the ground.

It roared and the very air shook. They could all feel it in their bones and in their teeth. The magic that flowed out of this horrific being. It might only be a fraction of the power of the full Night King but its very presence was warping

the world around it.

Rocks were crumbling and reforming. What was a ruined building was now rebuilding itself into a horrific temple. A pillar sporting the many eyes of the being in from them sprouted for the ground.

That was enough. Matt called out, "Begin"

It started with the turret. Bullets piercing the body and the tendrils of the monster. Pilfolia also raised her hands to create a giant ball of fire. It then shifted and turned a blue hue before she threw it as the avatar. The fire crashed into the monster, roasting it and frying it. But even through that it still moved.

As the fires dimmed the others charged. Swords and fists beat down upon the form of the avatar. The quick and brilliant moves of the Holy Knight Zanetha. The brutal but efficient strokes of Grimkey, the Dragon slayer. The wild fury and force of Red. The technical but agile movements of Yellow who appeared behind the avatar. The instant motions of Blue, showing up where needed and disabling tendrils that were about to grasp somebody.

They were coordinated near flawlessly. The avatar seemed helpless beneath the fury of all those attacks. Just as the flurry slowed they pulled back for another round of bullets and second fireball falling into the being.

There was a moment of silence. All there effect, was it enough to stop the monster.

They held their breath, nobody daring to say anything in case that jinxed it.

From the bloody form of the avatar of the Night King there was movement. The body reformed, the tendrils regrowing. Even their short moment of silence was enough for the creature to rise once more. Nothing that they had done seemed to have harmed it.

The attacks resumed, perhaps even stronger than before. But this time things were different. The focus had been broken. The monster now had moments to slap aside attacks. Send a blade of razor flesh at a target. To move slowly forward.

Saint Cyan began her job. Healing those that were injured. They rose once more with vigor and determination not to be healing another time. But that determination was worthless. They were being pushed back.

The avatar was growing larger and larger. More tendrils came to bare against them. Before they outnumbered the number of attacks the monster could make. Now they were getting outnumbered. The knights joined the fray, helping keep the tendrils under control. And it worked. For a minute they thought it would be enough.

But the avatar was growing bigger even now. Everybody held for another minute and then the knights started being injured. They were turning into motes of light as each one was defeated. Pilfola could now just continually rain magical death upon the avatar because it had grown so long but now that seemed little more than a minor nuisance to the monster.

Matt drew his sword. It was time for him to join the fight. He ran in to aid his friends. He began to aid in the efforts to cut down tendrils. But even more came. One slammed Grimkey, throwing him away. As he flew through the air he threw his sword to Matt. "Take it. Kill it." He yelled before slamming into a nearby car.

Matt dropped his plain sword and caught the Grimkey's sword. He faced off against the avatar. The sword in his hands flowing with burning light. He raised it high and charged the avatar.

Then one of the tendrils of the avatar pierced his chest, ripping a giant ragged hole through it.

Matt coughed up blood. "No...."

"FoOl" said the beast. "YoU ThOuGhT YoU cOuLD wIn? HoW pAtHeTiC!"

—

Far away a form walked down a set of stairs. A robe covered their form but they carried a candle to light the way. They walked down the old musty stone carved tunnels, stepping over the skeletons that strewn the ground. They passed through twisting tunnels to finally arrive at a large room.

There were pillars in multiple points in the room. Aligned with coffins along the side. And in the center of the room was a large slab of stone, stained the coppery brown of dried blood. The form walked up the small set of stairs just before it. Then the person stopped.

"Now look here. What would you happen to be doing here Lady?" From

behind one of the pillars stepped Matt. He was wearing a fancy black suit.

The woman stepped back and with the motion it revealed who she was under the robe. It was indeed the Lady. She stood there, near the top of the steps looking at him.

"Surprised to see me?" Said Matt, "I would like to say the same about you.... But considering that I am here, that would be a lie. Do you want to try and explain yourself?"

She stood straightly but still didn't say a word.

"It looks like it is true that you could not speak but I did wonder about it. You are probably wondering why I am here and not dying to the avatar that is breaking free from the underground? Well, I guess since somebody had to explain it might as well be me."

Matt took a step forward and with that the Lady took a step backward. "You see, everything was just too confusing. Perplexing really. Time travel? An evil Matt? Powerful cultists that turned out to be easy to defeat? A powerful leader that almost immediately sacrificed himself to summon the avatar?" He took another step forward and she backward.

"I might have been tricked too. Except for that painting of me fighting the avatar. It felt too wrong." Matt snapped his fingers, red fire lit around him. His skin turned red and horns sprouted from his head. He snapped his fingers again and he was hooded form holding a staff. He snapped them again and he was back to his black suit. "You see, that person, the one who fights a monster with a sword, that is not me."

One more step forward. She took another backward but was stopped by the wall. There should have been a doorway there but now it was solid stone.

"Remind me again what the conditions to summon the Night King are? Oh right. Underground and during a new moon. Wow, would you look at that. Some might consider two nights afterward to not be the new moon but perhaps it is close enough. And this crypt created by the necromancer feels pretty underground to me." He smiled, "I wonder what it is that you are planning to do here Lady? Or are you the real Sri? I haven't quite figured that out yet."

Her eyes shifted side to side, looking for an escape.

"Now Estefania. She was just so authentic that I kept doubting myself whenever I doubted her. She just believed everything. And it isn't like you could have told her right? You can't speak. But if I had to guess, you do have some kind of mind control magic. After all that would explain how I found Estefania in the manor basement in a comatose state. She must have been quite the useful pawn, powerful but easily manipulated."

He stepped forward again. Leaving just two steps between them.

"I've always heard that prophecy is dangerous. It never shows exactly what you want to see. The painting of lots of me and Estefania, I'm pretty certain that was a fake. As was the one of me in this suit. Although it is quite a nice suit. I had it made as a rush job just for this occasion. But the others, what if the person being tricked the whole time wasn't me, it was you?"

He stepped forward once more, leaving almost no space between them. "Tonight I had a doppelgänger take my place. That way I can fight against the avatar just like you predicted. I'm sure you always wondered why those other paintings never included me? Well, it is because I am not the main character, and it looks like you aren't either."

Several men in black suits and black sunglasses stepped out from behind other pillars. They had guns. The barrels of the guns were never heard by anybody but those inside the tomb.

Matt turned away, "Like me, you only had tricks and lies. Unlike me you didn't have anybody you trusted."

"No Matt!" Screamed Curtis. Red light poured off him. A red form of a giant lizard seemed to appear behind him. He rose, the red billowing around him. When the red crystalized into a sword in his hands. He ran forward with unbelievable speeds. The sword sliced through the avatar, cutting it in twain.

It screeched one final terrible sound. Perhaps, if somebody believed in it then it could regenerate. Perhaps if somebody truly desired the destruction of the city then it would have lived. But nobody did, not anymore. Instead of healing, the flames of the red blade burnt it from the inside.

Curtis knelt before crumpled body of Matt, lifting him up, "No, Matt, speak to

me. We will get Saint Cyan to heal you.”

Saint Cyan was already running to him but that injury might be too much even for her.

“Your stance is still bad.” Said a cracked gravely voice. The form of Matt began to shift to gray flesh. “But that last part wasn’t that bad.” The gray form nodded and then broke apart into motes of white light, return to where it had been summoned from.

“Wait... he was Whisper?” He looked up in confusion. “Uhh... then where is Matt?”

Red shouted, “That annoying idiot didn’t tell me the plan again. I swear I am never working with him again.” He huffed and puffed. Yellow patted him on the arm consolingly.

Curtis shook his head, “Matt, you sly dog.” He looked over at the burnt remains of the avatar which was already beginning to dissolve into black smoke. “It just kept regenerating until just now. He must have done something to help defeat it. I have no idea what that might be though.”

Mari also looked at the cooked monster, “I know he had a bunch of uncertainty about Estefania and potential time travel. Maybe he finally figured it out?”

“Time travel?”

“Supposedly. But even if it was true it looks like we won’t need to worry about it. The avatar is dead. Good job to us.” She called out louder, “Saint Cyan, how is everybody else doing?”

She was composing herself. She had looked quite panicked when running over toward Matt. “Oh, I’ll check. But once all of us here are checked I need to return home. My knights there could be badly injured.” She began to quickly check all the knights that remained which wasn’t very many.

Blue and Green both had some minor injures but after having been healed a couple of times by Saint Cyan during the fight itself they decided on passing on any extra healing.

Around when she was finishing healing those who accepted it, Mari received

a phone call. She had transformed out of her knight form just in case this had happened.

"Oh, Matt, it is good to hear from you. We were a bit worried about you. Your doppelgänger that was pretending to be you got stabbed through the chest. But we did manage to defeat the avatar a little bit after that. How it is on your side?"

There was a pause as Mari listened.

"I see. Well keep me informed if there is anything else. We will finish up here." She shut her phone as she turned to everybody else who were waiting for her, not so patiently. "It looks like everything has been dealt with. Saint Cyan, you can live whenever you want now."

The Saint nodded and then her and her knights all dissolved into motes of light.

"He said he found and dispatched the true leader of the cult. It looks like that person had been manipulating Estefania. Matt is going to free her right now. He said we should finish cleaning up here and then he will meet us at the shed hideout."

Red looked very annoyed but Mari continued, "He also said that he would explain everything once we arrived. Really explain everything."

"Fine... the avatar is dead and we are alive. So I guess I'll let him explain himself." Red grumbled, "Blue, pickup the turret. We are getting out of here."

"Tecla, can you finish incinerating the body. It might look like it is dissolving but better to be safe than sorry in this case."

Tecla nodded, "We will destroy what remains of its essence."

Both Curtis and Mari giggled a little bit at her words. They quieted a little when the flames exploded over the dissipating form of the avatar.

Chapter Nine: Beyond the Next Horizon

Matt brought an axe down on the locked door. The door shattered and he stepped down in the darkness. He carried a flashlight as he stepped down the stairs into the basement. The place was quiet and cold. The stairs creaked under he feet. The route concrete floor of the basement was dirty.

He stepped through the rooms. It was filled with partially finished paintings.

It told a story of a bunch of people fighting against the cult that was summoning the Night King. She had known so much from all of these. It even included Matt's friends.

He stopped in front of one of them. It was perhaps a self portrait. It showed the Lady Sri standing in the ruins of a city. Matt stared at it. A future that he had prevented from coming to pass. Yet, it was another thing he needed to do. He scratched his chin. He would need to fabricate the scene for this painting too. Although, he didn't know if it was needed anymore.

He shook his head and stepped farther into the basement. Another door creaked open and he stepped in. Laying strapped to a table was Estefania. A red crystal was hung from the ceiling and pulsed ominously.

Matt shot it.

It shattered into pieces, leaving the only light in the room the flashlight that Matt was holding in his off hand. He holstered his pistol. Matt stepped toward the table in the room. He pulled out a knife and cut Estefania free from the table. Immediately she started rising upward. Even unconscious she disobeyed the laws of gravity.

That made it easy for Matt to grab her. He carried her through the hallways and back up the stairs. He left the manor and out into the moonless night. As he got into the fresh air, Estefania stirred. Her eyes flickered open as she looked up at him.

"Matt... your here. I knew you would come."

Matt looked down at her. How much did she know about what had happened, the truth of things. He didn't know. Did she believe she was a time traveler?

"Yes, I'm here. You can rest now. You are safe."

She smile, raising her hand to stoke his cheek. Then the hand fell and she was asleep again. Matt carried her to his car. Bluebird was there and he opened the door for Matt to put Estefania into the car.

"Thanks." Said Matt.

"I was never much of a fighter. It was easier to help you investigate than deal with whatever monster you were handling."

"Any luck figuring out where Estafani or Lady Sri came from?"

He smirked a little, "Maybe a hint. Me and Buck have a lead we want to follow but it will require us to leave town. Is that alright with you?"

"Like you would listen to me if I said no."

"Depends on if there was jewels at the end or not. You could bribe me to change what I planned on doing."

"No, go after the lead. I've been drowning myself in sorrow for too long. I need some time to finish swimming to the surface."

"But, there might be more to it. The story you were told about Sri being part of a mage family is the truth. They aren't local but from what I've been told they are influential. They might be a little miffed that one of their scions got offed. And I don't know if the whole 'destroying the city' excuse is going to cut it when dealing with them."

Matt's eyes narrowed. "Well, then I will need to teach them what it means to cross the Trickster. Get whatever information you can and then get back to me. Do you need a phone?"

Bluebird pulled one out, "Already ahead of you. These things are pretty neat. I've already thought of all kinds of useful things I can do with them."

Matt shook his head, "Adapting quickly are you? Not in any rush to return home?"

"I've always been a lone wolf. Home has never really meant anything to me. This is as close to home as anywhere else."

Matt looked up at the dark sky and then down at Estefania sleeping in the back seat of the car. "I recommend finding a home. Someplace you want to return back to. I spent so long running and hiding from my problems that I forgot what it was like to have a home. Maybe now I can start to have one again. I have returned to my friends, returned to who I am."

"Hey man. Don't push your weird emotional trauma onto me. I've just hired help. Don't try and think of me as your friend."

Matt looked at Bluebird. "Are you not? Out of everybody it was Estefania and you and reached out to me, tried to free me from my emotional prison. I won't forget that so easy."

Bluebird turned away. His face was hidden from Matt. Even if he was showing emotion then nobody could see it. "Emotional idiot. Just take her away now."

Matt nodded and got in the car. He drove away. He brought Estefania away from the mansion. Lit appeared behind him. The mansion lit flame. Some pasts were best to leave behind while others were good to return to.

When he arrived at the apartment he carried Estefania into the elevator and up to his apartment. The place was different now. The magic gone. The place was back to being a normal apartment again. He brought her to his room and laid her down on his bed. Then his returned to the living room and sat down on his couch. It was soft, relaxing.

He sat there. How long had it been since he had felt like this. He felt, at peace.

He still had things to do. But now he could begin filling his plan with things he wanted to do. It was a strange feeling, he hadn't wanted to do things for a while. He had gotten those paints and now he wanted to paint some more.

He had also just completed an adventure with Curtis, Tecla, and Mari. It had just ended but already he felt like he wanted to go on another one. Maybe travel. There were so many interesting places, both in this world and others. He also didn't know much about how magic really worked.

There were so many things he wanted to do now.

With that desire, he slept.

"Matt Matt Matt!" He was woken by the calls of Estefania. His eyes flickered up to see her. She was shaking him awake.

"Ah... your awake." He said groggily.

"What happened? You need to tell me what happened? The city... the city is alright!" She was excited. Too excited.

Matt groaned and looked at his phone. It was early. Too early. "We beat the avatar. There isn't much else to tell about it." He stretched and got up.

"But but... the cavern. It collapsed. How did you survive?"

"Magic." It just felt right to use that excuse. He continued to be pestered by Estefania as he moved over to the coffee machine. It wasn't until he got his cup

and began sipping it that he gave her a real answer. "I had my mole ally Snagglefoot rescue us at the last moment. It was a pretty close call. Then we regrouped and added a couple of extra local mages that I was old friends with. All of us together were able to deal with the avatar. It was still a pretty tough fight though."

"Wow!" She did flips in the air, "You really are amazing Matt. I knew you could do it..." She lowered down to the ground, "Well... I'm glad you could do it. I'm afraid I gave up home for a minute there."

Matt reached out and placed his hand on her head. He roughed up her hair a little bit. "Don't worry about it. We managed. And now you don't have to worry about the city any more."

She smiled brilliantly at him. "You truly are amazing!"

Matt felt a bit ashamed at her praise. Really the fighting hadn't been him. It had been all of the others. All he had done was track down the person who caused all these issues. And he couldn't bring himself to tell Estefania about that. She seemed to consider The Lady her friend.

"Oh, would you look at the time." Said Matt. "It seems that I need to get to work."

"Work?"

"Yes, I work as an accountant. I believe I mentioned that when we were going after Doctor Amandeep."

"Uhh... didn't you quit that?"

"Huh..." Matt looked confused. "No. I didn't quit. I had a lot of backed up time off so I just spent that. Why would I quit?"

"Didn't you hate that job?"

"Oh... I suppose I did."

Matt gave a little smile, "But I don't think it is their fault. While I can't say I will remain there forever, for now I'm going to return. I need to see the place with new eyes before I make a real decision. But what about you?"

"Me? What about me?"

"Your task is done. What is your plan next?"

"Huh...." She floated up and spun around a few times, "Don't know. I'm a free soul so I do whatever it is that I want. For now I think I'm just going to stick around. See what is happening. Make sure nothing happens in the next new moon. Then maybe fly away. Will you miss me?"

Matt nodded, "Yes I will. I don't know if you know it but before I met you I was in a bad place mentally. You and your adventure helped me break free from that. So thank you."

She grinned but looked a little abashed. "Glad to help you Matt." She paused then dipped up and down a couple of times. "You had that space station place. Maybe I could explore space!"

"I'm sure you could." Matt checked it phone. It was almost time for him to go to work. Not the unusually early that he had previously done but the normal time he was supposed to arrive there. "And it looks like it is time for me to go to work. You are free to stay here as long as you want."

She nodded and he left. He took his car to the office. As he looked up at the building it felt different. The building felt bright and shiny. The reflective windows showing the sky. He entered the building and strode to the elevator. The receptionist watched him with a look of utter surprise.

He rose the elevator to the floor he worked on. When he arrived there was quite the commotion as he took his place where he had worked for so long. It only took a few minutes for a couple of his coworkers to appear around him.

"Matt, where have you been? The boss has been breathing down our neck about the fact that you were missing. Without you things have been crazy and nobody knew how everything worked like you did."

"It shouldn't have been that bad. I was only gone for two weeks." It felt like much longer for Matt but it hadn't been that long.

"It was terrible. The CFO misplaced an entire month of records. We needed to rebuild the entire month of records from practically scratch. Really man, we could have used me."

"A very important event happened and I needed to attend. It really couldn't have been avoided. But I'm sure you all managed fine without me."

They looked nervously at each other. Matt was seeming much more friendly

and personable than they were used too. He had been so morose perviously, simply accepting work and getting it done. This side of him was completely unfamiliar to them.

Then they parted like water as Matt's boss came toward him. He had practically a livid look on his face.

"Where have you been!" He was practically shouting.

"Time off."

"Who said you could do that?" He puffed angrily.

"You did. You approved my request."

There was a terrible moment of hesitation from him. "But.... There was a critical issue and I had to revoke your time off at the last moment."

"I'm sorry about that. But I was not able to receive any work messages while I was gone. I did see something during one of my free moments but it wasn't from HR so I ignored it. After all only HR can revoke free time like that, at least according to our employee manual."

There was a moment of deflation from him. Matt knew the employee rules as well if not better than him. He struggled to fine a response. "If you aren't cooperative then we can replace you with somebody that is."

"Sure. Let me know if that happens." Matt was not about to accept any of his bluster. Now that he had seen what he had lost there was no need for him to just survive. If this place did not want him then he could just move to someplace that did.

The manager really did not know how to respond to that. He stood there contemplating whether he really should fire Matt. He didn't really have any real grounds for firing him and Matt was too useful to just fire for no reason. So the manager deflated a little bit. "As long as you understand. And try to make sure you get your time off request submitted earlier next time. I can't guarantee they will be approved next time without earlier prior notice."

"Understood. Thank you for accepting it so quickly this time." Matt bowed his head slightly. He was a little thankful for that. Sure the manager probably just handed that task off to his secretary but it had been helpful that the request had been almost immediately accepted. Otherwise Matt might have needed to quit.

The manager left, still annoyed but mollified.

The man next to Matt shook his head, "Wow, you managed to handle him masterfully Matt. I didn't know you could do that. Really, you have to tell me where you have been!"

"I was saving the city from a eldritch monster."

"Ha! Good one." He slapped Matt on the back, "But it looks like your vacation managed to give you a sense of humor. You looked better than before." He leaned in, "And you were right. We did managed to figure out the report but it would have been much easier with you. Well, the boss might get angry if we keep hanging around you. So you have got to tell us more about saving the city later." He laughed and left Matt alone.

Matt smiled. He looked at his computer. Maybe it wasn't actually so bad here.

Returning to the numbers was pretty nice. It was relaxing now. When his scheduled hours were over he stood and began to leave the office. He was just passing the janitor as he left. But Matt stopped. "Harald. Do you want to go get a beer sometime? You look like you could use it."

The janitor paused, he looked very surprised, "Uhh.... Sure. When did you want to go Matt?"

"If you want me to meet you in a few hours when you are off we can go then."

He nodded, "Sure, sounds good. I'll see you there."

Matt left with a nod. "See you there."

Several hours later Matt met Harald as he left work. They had a beer before Matt returned home. Estefania was there waiting for him, annoyed that he had taken so long.

"What is this? Weren't you not going to do that crazy work thing anymore?"

Matt laughed, "Nah, this was something else. I meet with a friend that I had long ignored. Besides I also bought some extra things." He raised a bag. It was filled with paints and miniatures. He had looked at them enviously the last time he had been in the store so this time time he had gotten them, he had the time he needed to work on them now.

Estefania looked at those curiously. "Those are your partially completed

magical tools right? How does this work?"

"I can show you if you want?"

"Sure, let me see."

Matt spent the night painting. Although he was frequently interrupted by Estefania. Eventually he was free of her pestering when she finally fell asleep. At least he thought she was asleep. She was just floating in his living room clutching a pillow. Maybe the air did indeed make a good bed, Matt didn't know.

Several days later Matt's place was ready. His table covered with a mat that replicated the grid from the table back in the shed. Snacks and food were setup in the kitchen. Estefania had tried to help but she had just cause more mess than actual help.

There was a knock on the door. It was Curtis and Tecla. Matt gave them hugs as he let them in. Not too much later Mari had arrived. The door was unlocked so she just let herself in, she had been here plenty of times already. She also brought an extra dish which she added to the counter of snacks.

Red, Yellow, Blue, and Green arrived not too long after. Red still looked a little grumpy but that might be his more natural facial expression. The others finally got the opportunity to really introduce each other. Tecla hid away behind Curtis who took the lead in introducing everybody to each other.

Matt relaxed in his chair. He watched his friends interact. He still hoped that Sheldon and Frey might join them at some point in the future, but for now he knew that this was enough. He had a place in the world again, no, he had never really lost it. He just didn't realize that it was still there.

The conversations continued for a while, Matt occasionally joining it. People had food and drinks and enjoyed each other's company. But eventually Matt clapped his hands. Everybody looked at him. Then they began to take their seats around the table.

Matt had made sure there were enough chairs for everybody, although there was an empty space for Estefania. She still preferred to float rather than using a chair. Curtis and Tecla sat together but the others just kinda chose spots at random around the table.

Matt closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was time, after so long. He had been waiting, waiting for this very moment. Then he said the words.

“We gather here today to see into another world. Let us see what the heroes have been up to in our absence.”