

ABSTRACT

Avalon Burning

H. Keller Bright, University Scholar

Director, Dr. Sarah Jane Murray

This short novel is the story of a boy and a girl who discover the magical island of Avalon and accidentally destroy it. Yet as with many stories, that is only the surface. Underneath the magic and monsters lies a simple truth illustrated in story form: the Good is often the worst enemy of the Best. This may sound counter-intuitive. After all, how can two people who both want good things be enemies? Yet consider what happens when one man, such as a police officer, seeks justice against a criminal while another, the brother of the accused, seeks to protect. It is good to follow the law. It is also good to protect your family. Yet when those goods are misordered, then they become enemies. This book proposes, then, that the only way to avoid such happenings and rightly order the goods in life is to hold the Greatest Good, God, above them all.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Sarah Jane Murray, Department Great Texts

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

AVALON BURNING

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By
Hamilton Keller Bright

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FOREWORD

This is the story of a boy and a girl, a brother and sister, who find the magical island of Avalon, where King Arthur lies, and accidentally destroy it.

But why this story? Why does it deserve to exist? I venture that it is not because it is special, although I am particularly fond of it. One need only stroll down the aisle of a bookstore to find hundreds of equal or better quality. Nor is the idea of children falling into a magical world original. Yet I defend it nonetheless, for though it is no more important than any other story, every book, poem, play or movie shares a great power not lightly discarded.

The world is full of stories. Mothers ask their children how their day went and they answer. Friends who've spent time apart sit down with a cup of coffee to catch up and swap tales. Children brag, and perhaps exaggerate, their latest exploits to their friends. Yet those are small stories, easily told and forgotten. Compared to them, Hollywood is a giant, a multi-billion-dollar machine that takes scripts and turns them into movies. It turns men and women into icons for their roles on the silver screen. Fans arrive hours, days even, before the newest releases just to see their favorite films. They buy merchandise, they watch interviews, they speculate and spend hours theorizing and trying to explain obscure points in the lore, and some even take what others have made and spin it into their own, derivative works either for fun or profit. Yet even these stories are easily forgotten. Fortunate is the movie whose fame lasts more than a decade.

Above and far beyond them, some stories have stood the test of time. The great tales have been around for millennia now: the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and other, more recent works such as the complete works of Shakespeare, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to name a few. Yet even in their shadow, humans continue to weave new tales, borrowing from the old, undeterred by the greatness of the past. Truly, stories are everywhere. The numbers are nearly endless, more than a single person could read if they had all the time in the world. From the oldest, Sumerian legends scratched onto rocks to the digitally stored and never-printed books sold on the Amazon Kindle store, stories have followed mankind wherever it has traveled. They are natural to us, a part of our soul.

The question, then, is how this book fits in with the rest. Nathaniel Hawthorne provides the answer in his little-known short story, *The Great Stone Face*. The story goes as follows. Once upon a time, in the middle of a valley lay a small town. Carved by nature into the side of a nearby mountain, a face of stone overlooked the valley, the Great Stone Face. The people said that it held the image of the best, most honest, and virtuous man who would ever live. They told themselves that one day a man would come whose face was the image of the Great Stone Face and would lead the town to glory. A boy named Ernest, whose heart was captured by the story, looked every day upon the Great Stone Face and studied it in hopes that, one day, he would see the man who bore its image.

As he grew, several men came to the town who supposedly fulfilled this prophecy. First came the banker, who brought his fortune to the town. The people

rejoiced and claimed that he would lead them to greatness. Ernest, however, knew the banker wasn't the one and turned away. The man's eyes were too weak and shrunken from counting all his gold. The old man built a mansion and holed himself up in it. He died without helping the town one bit. Then came the war hero whose face was too hard and dour from years of campaigning and bloodshed. He did not fulfill Ernest's hopes. Nor did the renowned scholar. Ernest, who alone studied the Great Stone Face and daily gazed upon it, saw them for what they were: not bad men, but just men.

Then came the poet, who Hawthorne says could have been the one, but though he had done some good with his work, he had also squandered and frittered away his talents a little too much. Yet the poet saw what no one else did. After years and years of gazing upon the Great Stone Face, Ernest's own had become the very image of it. His actions reflected that. He was dependable, hardworking, and whenever the townsfolk had a problem, they came to him for advice. He had become the best man who ever lived in that small mountain hamlet. He had become what he focused on. He had become the Great Stone Face cast into flesh. Gold lay in the banker's eyes, war in the soldier's, and knowledge in the scholar's, but virtue lay in his.

Nathaniel Hawthorne understood a simple truth, a truth found also in the Bible. Christ tells his followers to fix their eyes on the Lord so that their hearts might be transformed. Hawthorne shows that in practice. Ernest not only glanced at the Great Stone Face but fixed his eyes upon it. Thus, he became what he put in his heart. The banker, the soldier, the scholar, and the poet became what they focused on too, but the object of their desires was lesser than Ernest's.

Consider, then, how that principle works in fiction. A good story can capture imaginations. It can hold the heart and soul of a generation. Scholars study the literature of a time period in order to learn the cares, concerns, hopes, and dreams of that people, for it encapsulates them all. It is stunning, therefore, how many authors pay so little attention to the dire importance of their work. Capture a person's heart and one can change who that person is at down to the core. Arguments and logic can pound against the brain every day for a thousand years without changing a single mind, for humans are notoriously stubborn, yet a simple story can sway a thousand hearts. Therefore, it is of dire importance that one reads and listens to what is good and true. This is not to say that every book or movie must have an explicit moral, but merely that when a story promotes evil, it does more damage to a heart and plants whispers that can grow into weeds. Yet when a story shows what is good, such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it can do more good to the common man or woman than whole libraries of theology. In short importance of stories lies in their power to inspire the imagination and, though it may only do so in a small way to a few people, I hope that *Avalon Burning* will contribute to that process.

Yet there is another benefit to stories. In *The Great Stone Face*, the townspeople ran from one great man to another, fawning upon him and proclaiming that surely this man bore the image of the Great Stone Face. No matter how many times they were disappointed, they never learned. Yet Ernest, who daily studied and gazed upon the Face, instantly recognized the truth of the matter: none of those men bore the long-awaited visage. So, of all the townspeople, only the one whose focus rested in the right place remained aloof while the rest chased idle and futile phantoms of what they hoped.

This, then, is the purpose of fairy-tales. For a while, they came under attack for filling children's heads with frivolous and fantastic notions. They put their head in the clouds and made them ignore the good, plain, honest earth beneath their feet. Yet others, including G.K. Chesterton, have argued that fairy tales are vital to a child's moral development. "Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed." That is their purpose. They teach, they instruct, they provide the water which lets their moral imagination flourish. Who can say that adults do not occasionally need similar water?

Take, for example, the story of the *Snow Queen*, which has gained both fame and infamy for its rather famous Disney adaption, *Frozen*. Yet, despite the color and fun of the film, the original taught a much different message. The tale begins with a description of the Devil's mirror, a horrible contrivance of Hell that makes everything pure seem ugly and ridiculous and all that is evil seem pure and fair. The demons sneak into heaven, mirror in hand, and enter the very throne of the Universe. In their pride, they turn the mirror and look upon God. The mirror, confronted with the source of all good, laughs so hard that it shatters into pieces no larger than dust mites and falls to Earth.

One piece falls into the eye of a young boy and it has a terrible effect on him. He scorns all that is holy and becomes cold and cruel to his sister. One day, he wanders into the mountains and the Snow Queen comes for him. Then comes the most chilling line in the entire story. "He tried to pray, but realized that he'd forgotten how." Too long had he scorned God and, like King Claudius in *Hamlet*, he could no longer turn his eyes toward heaven. Yet all is not lost. His sister never forsook her prayers and, drawing strength from the love and charity she holds for her brother, she sets off on the perilous journey

into the mountains to find him. She goes through many trials and suffers greatly in the kingdom of snow, yet in the end she frees her brother of the Snow Queen's power and the mirror shard's grasp.

The lesson is clear. A child will not walk away thinking that mirrors are evil or that the Snow Queen will kidnap them and take them away to her dread court. At least, most children will not, though they may pretend. Rather, it is devilish to mock the things of God and those who do so place themselves in great peril. They know that a fairy tale is a fairy tale. Yet in the middle of laughing or listening with wide, scared eyes, an extraordinary thing is happening. A child does not need to be told that Cinderella's stepsisters are wicked. They know that they are, for they are cruel. Therefore, to be cruel is to be evil. They know that Little Red Riding Hood should not have listened to the Big Bad Wolf. They learn through these stories. From Puss in Boots, they learn the value of loyalty. From Saint George and the Dragon, bravery. From Edmund and Aslan, forgiveness. From Frodo, sacrifice.

That is the power of fairy tales. Not only do children learn to recognize virtue and vices in stories, but also in real life. As Ernest looked upon the imposters and saw the truth about them, so too can they look upon the world and see its imposters for what they are. The unrepentant liar is simply old Reynard the fox in a different skin. The schoolyard bully, a giant. The old, withered school-teacher who really has no love for children and should have found a different career ages ago, a witch. Furthermore, it teaches them how to deal with such creatures. They cannot take up swords and slay real-life dragons, for they know real-life is not a fairy-tale, but they can resist their power. They can be like the princes and princesses, the peasant boys and girls, the baker's daughter and seamstress'

son, who see the great evil in their world and are not cowed. They may be made captive. They may be made to mop a floor with their own hair and tears. Yet they are not overcome. They know what it means to be good and from that knowledge they draw strength.

That is where *Avalon Burning* aims its thrust. It is not the most important book they could read, many others should be placed before it on that list, but it has an important truth at its core and one that is rarely discussed: the Good is often the worst enemy of the Best. Such a claim may seem odd, but it is true nonetheless. After all, it is easy to see evil for what it is and resist it, but much harder is it to see when good itself begins to hold one back. In that moment, I believe the Devil himself laughs, just as the mirror did. However, if young readers focus on *Avalon Burning* and similar, moral stories, then like Ernest, they hopefully will one day find themselves transformed into men and women who seek after the Greatest of all Goods, God, and are able to properly order the others below Him.

Yet first, before I could even consider the impact the story may or may not have, I had to do my due diligence. A common misconception held by many is that writing fiction is somehow less difficult than doing a research paper. That is not true: it is simply much more fun. In preparation for outlining, I researched how stories were made. My initial concept was to take a small cast of characters and create a series of short vignettes, each about fifteen or so pages. Each one would focus on a different member of the Seven Deadly Sins and their counterparts, the Seven Heavenly Virtues, though this vision changed into an exploration of “sick” virtues over pure evil. Therefore my research included such sources as Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, Dante’s *Inferno*, and *The Fall*. Yet I

intended and still do intend the book for a much younger and more contemporary audience who seek entertainment first and foremost, so I also drew upon the likes of *Zootopia*, *Gattica*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Godfather*, and *The Matrix* as inspirations.

The Screwtape Letters provide much in the way of good, moral teaching. So many lessons and maxims lie within it would take several books to properly discuss them all. However, for the purposes of my thesis, I only pulled a few more intriguing ones that I thought I could use. First, the idea of a villain who is bent, not broken, intrigued me. Smeagol/Gollum would fit this quite nicely. As fun as it is to have a mustache-twirling dark lord, someone who is evil simply for the sake of being evil does not make for an interesting character. However, the villain should not be so sympathetic that the line between good and evil becomes blurred. The sides should still be clear. From this, I came up with the idea of the King of Avalon. Driven mad with grief, he has ordered that all humans who find themselves in his domain be brought to him for execution. Secondly, Lewis discusses the “kingdom of noise.” The demons plan to blot out all music, and all other beauty, and merely distract their prey with constant business. After all, if they throw everything at the humans all at once, they have a much higher chance of slipping something big right past them. From this, I created Maen, the true villain of the story, and his particular style of temptation. He never shuts up and always fills Amanda’s head with his ideas. He never gives her enough time to think through her actions and perhaps wonder if she’s doing the right thing working for him.

As with the *Screwtape Letters*, Dante’s *Inferno* deserves a much longer treatment, yet here I will only highlight how it directly contributed to the formation of the novel. It

provided a good amount of notes complementary to the ones from *The Screwtape Letters*. First, the reader feels sympathy for the souls in Hell, though they are beyond redemption. This reinforces the idea of “bent, not broken”. Secondly, Dante uses metaphoric imagery to masterful effect. There are the people chasing after the banner, the souls trapped in Limbo, unable to make that final push to Heaven, the wrathful stewing in their rage, the flatterers in their excrement, and a host of other ironic examples. I wish I could claim that I had created something similar in tone and effect with mastery on every page. However, I can at least say that I set up a few smaller bits of metaphoric imagery. Grand Inquisitor Selby is a “shadowman”, a creature made of darkness and night. He is not evil, but he serves the kingdom as its protector. In that role, he does whatever he deems necessary. Giving him that dark aspect highlights the moral ambiguity of his actions. Furthermore, Maen the mad prince of Avalon originally had the name Maenis, which translates as “Madness” from the ancient Greek. However, that was a bit too oblique, and so I shortened it to something which merely suggested it instead.

The Fall was a very disturbing book to read. It has power and I found myself taken aback on more than one occasion. In short, it argues that there is hypocrisy in every good action. In all fairness, that is not a new idea. One can read that in John Calvin and come away feeling much more edified. Yet to read that principle dramatized in such a way was nonetheless disturbing, which I believe is the point. The book makes me glad that I have faith that God is, in fact, not dead because it leaves open the possibility of some good in myself and in man, no matter what Calvin might say. Yet it did cause me to consider what the world would be like without that hope. From that thought grew the central conflict of my own book: the good is often the worst enemy of the best. Without

the unifying, overarching principle of the Supreme Good which God provides, it would seem that all the lesser goods would try to take its place and do more harm than evil did before. From that came *Avalon Burning*'s whole impulse.

As to *The Matrix* and the rest, the lessons I drew from them were more story-related than philosophical. *The Matrix* is an excellent piece of world-building that draws the audience in from the very first second. That dramatic first sequence gives just enough detail and leaves just enough questions to make the rest of the story interesting. From the beginning, it is clear who is good and who is bad. Secondly, while it does use a number of cliches, such as the fate of the whole world being at stake, it performs them so well that the audience doesn't mind. I hope I have done a similar job with a few that I used. After all, *Avalon Burning* is not the first, second, or one-hundredth story that shows children falling into a fantasy world and having magical adventures there.

The Godfather is an unusual place to find a struggle between good and evil. Yet it serves as a reminder that not all villains are created equal. Some, like Vito, have a sense of morals and code. He helps those who respect him, dislikes the drug trade, and sticks to his convictions. On the other hand, the villains he faces are mobsters just a bit worse than the heroes. In truth, almost every character in the movie has the potential to be a villain. Even Vito does, were he in a different story. However, in relation to each other, the two sides remain clear. This movie, therefore, reinforced the idea of "bent" villains and, yes, even heroes. From it, I drew the first inklings of the idea of having a bad hero. Eventually, that culminated in Amanda Watters, one of the two main characters, falling under Maen's spell for a time and almost becoming a villain.

Taming of the Shrew showed the power of subplots and how much depth they add to a story. However, any Shakespeare play could have done as much. What this one in particular had that others might not is inversion. This particular play uses it to comedic effect. “Nothing is good enough for you, therefore you shall have nothing!” for example. It is a sort of orange logic that, when played up, makes the audience laugh from how absurd it is. Therefore, in *Avalon Burning*, I attempted to use the tropes of the genre and similarly invert them. Thus, Amanda falls in with the forces of evil and Mike’s desire to be a hero does not save the world as one might expect. Furthermore, the play presents us with a very entertaining conflict between two protagonists, a theme that I adopted rather heavily. Now, this was not the first time I had come across such an arrangement, as it is a fairly common theme in all kinds of genres, but it was the first time I had taken notice of it for the purpose of study.

Gattica presents a society that is mostly recognizable. There are still desk jobs, researchers, doctors, astronauts, and janitors. There is only one fantastic element: gene manipulation and the story remains very focused as a result. This movie therefore brought to my attention the need to keep the world of Avalon relatively limited. The focus needed to be on the story, not the world. Furthermore, the story needs to be one that could only happen in a world of magic and monsters. If the same events could happen without a fantastic setting, then there is no need for the background elements. At best, they contribute nothing, and at worst, they distract the reader.

Lastly, I considered the relatively new movie *Zootopia*. It served as a case study for a three-act-structure, which will be mentioned in detail in a moment. Yet beyond that, what it excelled at and what I strove to imitate was its intimate attention to each and

every character. The movie contains a menagerie of colorful personalities, jokes, and puns with regards to the creatures on screen. For example, sloths run the DMV, the population of Bunnyburrow rises every second, and timberwolves have a weakness for howling. Each character has a story, even if they appear only for a minute, and they act accordingly. They do not seem like mere set-pieces, but real people. Plus, the story is just plain fun.

Yet these disparate elements would do no good were there not a structure to unify them. So, with the help of Dr. Murray, I cast it in the very same mold that all great and successful stories have. Now, this claim might seem odd. After all, between full-length books, epic poems, magazine serials, television shows, movies, and all the other forms of media, it would seem that there could not be a unifying principle. Genre further refracts the lot. Comedy and tragedy require elements quite apart from one another. Yet the chief concern of structure is rather simple, so simple as to be painfully obvious. A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero of a Thousand Faces* proposes that there really is only one story told and retold throughout human history. He calls this the "monomyth." In short, the hero of the story begins in the ordinary world, where he knows his or her place and everything is familiar. They may not be comfortable, but they are at least familiar. Next comes the call to adventure, where the extraordinary forces come into play. For example, Lucy finding the wardrobe. Next comes the refusal, such as in the Matrix where Neo originally refuses to believe that he is trapped inside a simulation. Yet eventually, the hero must take up the call and face the trials which come after. Along the way, he or she may or may not come across friendly forces that will aid them in their

quest. Frodo discovers that his greatest friend, Samwise Gamgee, is also his greatest supporter. Following the story's greatest trial, a final battle, a state singing competition, or some other endeavor, the hero receives a "boon", such as peace in our time, an award, self-confidence, etc, which they can then choose to take back with them to the world before or remain where they are and enjoy the fruits of their labors.

Very few contain all of these elements and many present them out of order. Yet that underlying structure unifies the diverse world of stories. His book, of course, goes into much more detail on the topic, but the usefulness of the template cannot be denied either. It helps lend order to what might otherwise be chaos and allows for others to more easily imitate what made the old stories great. Nor does this simply exist in the realm of theory, but one can also observe it in practice. Pixar uses a variation of the template to plot out all of their stories, a variation detailed in Dr. Murray's Book *Three Act What?* That means that *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, *Up*, *The Incredibles*, and many others have the same basic structure as the *Iliad*. In the face of such glowing commendations and a long history of success, one would be a fool to not adopt it. Therefore, *Avalon Burning* shares it as well.

This structure differs from Campbell in its specificity. Though a near-infinite amount of different events can occur in each spot, the sequence itself is set in stone. It still adheres to three acts, but has many different steps woven into each. For the purpose of illustration, consider the classic Christmas movie *Elf*. Act One is a sequence which sets up the world, introduces the characters, and generates the conflict between the dominant values of the world and the hero's underdog values, which he must carry to triumph. The first act begins with the Opening Image, which has the job of capturing the audience's

attention and introducing the overall stakes of the world. Here, Papa Elf, an endearing, timid figure, tells the story of how he came to raise Buddy. By the end, the audience can already see that the importance of family and Christmas are going to be themes in the film. Next comes the Ordinary World, where the protagonist's everyday life plays out and the audience gets a chance to learn who he is. The absurdity of a human living in an elf-sized world makes the entire sequence humorous, but in the background a storm of tension brews. The situation grows more and more out of control until something has to give. Buddy is unhappy and he cannot do the duties of an elf. This leads into the Inciting Incident, the spot where it becomes clear that nothing can ever be the same. Buddy, still under the delusion he's an elf, flunks out of his job at the assembly line. Buddy cannot function in elf society if he cannot perform to their standards. He has to find something else. Thus comes the Dilemma, the choice the character must face. Papa Elf tells Buddy of his true origin and he must decide to leave the world he knows or stay where he doesn't belong. It is not until he hears that his father is on the naughty list, however, that he reaches the Crossing of the Threshold and takes up the quest before him. In an act which requires suspension of disbelief but fits in well with the tone of the story so far, he boards an ice-floe and sets off for New York to find his father.

Act Two is a series of ascending and descending action that ties the first and third acts together. First comes a sequence of adventures that show the main character meeting moving forward and seeming to achieve his or her goals. During it, he or she grows and expands. This portion of the movie covers Buddy's arrival and exploration of New York, his father's initial rejection of him at the office, and his adventures at the department store. This sequence also introduces some of the supporting characters: his father and

Jovie the department store employee. Everything seems to become better and better for him. He has friends, he meets his father and introduces himself, and he gets a job at a toy store. Yet then comes the Midpoint, where the main character turns from passively interacting with the world to actively trying to change it and, in the process, sets things on a downward spiral. When he meets the fake Santa, he cannot stand by and let this travesty continue. He considers it his duty to dispel the lies that the corporation is spreading to the poor, innocent children. So he attacks and is jailed until his father comes to bail him out. The rest of the act is descending action. Things do not immediately turn for the worse, but slip that way inch by inch. This segment has Buddy taking more and more action in the world. He helps Michael in a snowball fight. He takes Jovie out on a date. He works to gain the love and acceptance of his family. He even goes to work with his father and break-dances in the mailroom. Throughout his adventures, he gets closer and closer to these people. Everything seems to be going well until the final portion of Act Two appears: the Brick Wall where all hope of accomplishing the goals seems to fade. Due to Buddy's interference, Miles Finch, the consultant that Walter brought in to help write his next book leaves. In response, Walter sends Buddy away. All seems lost for both of them. Their burgeoning relationship seems to be over.

Act Three carries the action from the lowest point up through the highest, victory and the triumph of the underdog values, and then onto the ending. First, the characters have to Break Through the brick wall. Despite the temptation to use Finch's book to reclaim his career, in the face of Michael's pleas, Walter decides to go after Buddy. He has given up on his old values and embraced the new ones, or at least begun to. As for the elf-raised man himself, he finds Santa fallen out of the sky in central park. This, along

with the apology, brings him out of his funk in time to help Santa restore power to the sleigh. Buddy's changing values are that he learns to care not just about Christmas but also about his family and the new friends he makes in the unfriendly New York. Then, they have to make a Plan, but of course, things go Not According to the Plan. They attempt to fix the sleigh, but the Central Park Rangers are after Santa. They intend to cancel Christmas permanently. This, of course, cannot be allowed, and father and son work together to stop it. While Buddy tries to reattach the engine, Michael tries to use Santa's list to restore the people's faith in the jolly old saint. Yet their efforts are for naught. The Park Rangers are closing in too quickly. Then comes the Final Confrontation. In the end, it is Jovie's rendition of 'Santa Claus is coming to Town' that restores power to the sleigh. At least enough for it to move. But it is only when Walter joins in, abandoning completely his old ideals and embracing the new ones, that the sleigh gains enough power and takes off into the air. Santa escapes and Christmas is saved. Then comes the Closing Image, a short, sweet wrap-up that tells the audience exactly where all the characters end up without dragging on for too long or making the audience question where the ending is supposed to be.

This sequence, Opening Image to Threshold to Midpoint to Brick Wall to Final Confrontation to Closing Image, serves as the basis for almost every successful film of modern times. *Star Wars: Episode IV* is another textbook example of this. Who can forget the Opening Image, the iconic shot of Princess Leia's blockade runner fleeing the wrath of the Imperial Star Destroyer? Or the Death Star trench run, the Final Confrontation? Therefore, thanks to its great success and many, glowing

recommendations, I chose to make this same, proven structure the basis for *Avalon Burning*.

That is how I tried to set the novel up for success. I chose the best story structure I could find. I studied other successful works in detail. I looked for elements I could use to formulate and improve the book above and beyond where my own intellect would carry me. Yet even with all of that, the only result would be a very entertaining tale if I did not weave in something more, a truth I wished to demonstrate. Thus, I sat in thought and, after much hard work, finally produced something worthwhile.

The basic premise of the story is simple: a boy and a girl travel to a magical world and have adventures. As a result of their mistakes, the island sinks and everyone on it must flee to Earth. Now, the children are not clumsy and Avalon is not so fragile that any idiot could wander in and set the whole thing tumbling down like so many blocks.

Rather, all the characters find themselves at cross-purposes and that struggle, a struggle between otherwise good people who just want to do what they think is right, allows the forces of evil a chance to rise up and overthrow the king, defeat the army, and destroy the island. Though they do manage to work together in the end, the cost of their foolishness is still great. Avalon sinks into the Void Sea, lost forever beneath the waves. Only the inhabitants of it, the Feyfolken, make it out alive due to the sacrifices of the protagonists.

The story functions almost as an illustrated piece of philosophy. Where a treatise might argue and use stories as an example, *Avalon Burning* serves as an extended dramatization of a simple point: the good is often the worst enemy of the best. To this end, each major character and many minor ones have one thing on their mind that they want above all else. They are good things too, but they lead them into conflict when the

other characters do not seek the same thing. From that conflict, the doom of Avalon arises.

Mike and Amanda Watters play the part of protagonists. Mike falls into the company of Prince Rafe and has a number of wonderful, fun adventures with him. Amanda, on the other hand, comes into contact with Maen, the White Fox and the traitor to Avalon. Of the two of them, Mike's desire is less noble but causes less trouble. The good he chooses is adventure. He has read fantasy books all his life and, presented with an opportunity to have his own adventure, jumps at the chance. However, his pursuit of it leads him to ignore the pain it causes his new friend, Rafe, and the potential consequences to his world.

Amanda, on the other hand, simply wants to find Mike and save him from this strange world. The good she chooses above all else is family, one of the best there is. Thus, her fall is all the greater. In order to save Mike's life, she casts aside all other concerns and steals Excalibur for herself. In doing so, she unwittingly releases Maen from his prison and brings doom into the world. Her desire was not bad, but she went awry when she did not properly order it with the other goods. Not until Maen betrays her and mocks her does she realize that he has been using her desire for his own gain. She holds out hope till the very end that all her actions will have been worth it once she has Mike safe and sound.

Prince Rafe's seeks to follow the ideals of heroism and knighthood laid out for him in the old stories. He has read tales of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Thus, he knows that humans can be good. Thus, of all the Feyfolken, he alone willingly accepts Mike even though the law dictates that all humans die. In doing so, he defies his

father and endangers his nation. His ideals blind him to the real world surrounding him and the reasons behind what he knows to be unjust laws.

Speaking of the King, his actions stem from his desire to protect Rafe and his kingdom from ever being hurt again. He lost one son thanks to the machinations and merciless actions of the humans and he is determined to protect what he has. However, as a result, he smothers Rafe and tries to keep him locked up in the palace. Thus, he loses his son, who slips through his fingers time and again. Also, without the law which demands the execution of any human who finds his or her way to Avalon, Amanda would never have set out on her quest. She sought Excalibur so she would have the power to save Mike. If she had not, the mythical sword would have remained undisturbed and Maen would have stayed sealed under the earth for all time.

Even Maen, the villain of the story, has a good he desires, though it is twisted and warped almost beyond recognition. He wants justice, but that desire has turned into revenge. He hates those who wronged him: the humans, his father, and even his own followers, who remind him daily of his fallen state. He seeks to destroy them all because they hurt him, for they did hurt him deeply. His curiosity about the human world led him to explore and risk more than he should have. Unfortunately, he fell into the hands of those whose scientific curiosity outweighed their other morals. His pain is real, but that does not excuse his actions. He remains evil, despite what sympathy one might or might not have for him. He is what happens when a desire for justice outpaces moderation, mercy, and kindness.

Grand Inquisitor Selby appears first as an antagonist and later an ally. He concerns himself solely with the good and safety of Avalon. The laws of the king stand

equal to the Bible to him. Thus, despite the evidence that Mike does not wish to bring about Avalon's destruction and is not dangerous as the King predicted, still he pursues the boy for the king has commanded it. If he had only been a little less pharisaical, he would have been able to spot the real danger in Maen and Amanda.

Captain Gale and her crew of scurvy sailors seek after money. In their defense, wealth can bring great happiness and allows one to exercise virtue in a way impossible without it. In that regard, wealth is a great good. Yet their love of it means they are too easily swayed to assist the forces of evil.

Mike and Amanda's parents, whose funeral they attend at the beginning of the book, have something good they pursue, though the path they take sets in motion the course of events. They simply want to understand and expand their scientific knowledge. In pursuit of that, they capture Maen and trap him inside a lab for years and years. They experiment upon him, trying to understand the principles behind magic. A quest for knowledge is not a bad thing and, in fact, is good. Yet here, when not properly ordered with the other goods, it becomes a great evil.

Through their efforts combined, a single, terrible path emerges. The King passes a law which places any human who enters the realm in mortal danger. Maen offers his help to Amanda, for he knows that she has no way to save Mike from the King and will take any other option. Thus, she finds herself forced onto a single path. She takes Excalibur from its place and Maen rises from his tomb. Mike's self-imposed delay causes him to be too late to stop her. Selby remains blind. Rafe remains rebellious. One by one, the pieces fall into place and spell doom for the island. Only by overcoming their limited perceptions and embracing the idea of a greater good do they in the third act save the

population of Avalon from falling with the island. Thus is the point illustrated and from there does this fairy tale draw its meaning.

That is the story of *Avalon Burning*, from inception to completion. It is no more important than any other good book, yet it is important because it is a good book. I have taken an important virtue and woven it into what I believe is a halfway decent tale.

Though few may read it, I hope those few find themselves closer to God, who is the Greatest of all Goods.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my Grandfather, Dr. Bill Bright, a faithful servant of God, who inspired so many others and me.

ACT ONE

Fairy Tales

“And what story would you like tonight?”

“Avalon! Avalon!” The twins pounded their fists in unison. “Avalon and the Fox-Prince.”

Dr. Matthew Watters smiled at his two children. “Mike, Amanda, I tell you those stories all the time. Don’t you want to hear something else?”

Mike shook his head. “No.”

“We want to hear your stories.” Amanda pouted. “Not one from a book.”

Dr. Watters leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips. “Once upon a time.” The twins huddled together excitedly. “There was a magical island named Avalon. No humans lived there. Instead, Feyfolken, creatures half-human and half-fae fight, live, laugh, and work wondrous magic on that merry island. And they are not alone. Six other islands ring them round, separated by the great Void Sea. It is an angry sea. Full of storms and high waves. And goblins roam the waters, plundering ships like pirates.”

“The prince of this land goes by the name of Maen Starchaser. His fur is...”

“White as snow,” Mike interrupted, “And his tail as thick as a bush. And his whiskers are always neatly combed. Ears tall and proud.”

Dr. Watters smiled. “Yes indeed. One night, he went walking through the Wandering Woods. The moon shone down and made his fur glow, but he didn’t notice.

He was wrapped in thought. 'I have done much in this world', he said to himself, 'I have mastered magic. I have saved the kingdom'."

"Twenty times," Mike said, "He's saved it twenty times."

"Twenty-one," Amanda corrected, "Don't forget the invasion of the Mushrooms."

"That doesn't count. They were only after the bread in the kitchen."

Dr. Watters cleared his throat. "I've saved the kingdom twenty times," he said, 'But now, I have a strange feeling. I want to go explore and see what there is to see.' And so he went home to the Royal Library, where all secrets are kept and guarded by the wise, powerful dragon Meerax, and there he found a book. A book which told of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, who now lie buried on King's Island to the North of Avalon."

"Maen was fascinated by this book. 'Humans,' he said to himself, 'I must go to this world, wherever it is, and find these humans who are noble and kind'. And so he did. He opened up one of the old Fae Roads, which run between all worlds, and traveled to Earth. But the humans were not kind. They captured him and held him in a dark prison, from which he can't escape."

"But he does," Mike said, "He has to. He's the hero."

Dr. Watters glanced at his phone and frowned. "Not yet he hasn't. But he tries, he tries every night."

"He will," Mike said, "Heroes always find a way. And if he can't, then when I grow up, I'll find a way to save him."

Amanda scoffed. "His dad's the king. He'll get rescued long before you grow up."

Dr. Watters patted them on the head. "Time for bed you two. Your mother and I have to run, but we'll be back before you know it." He slipped out and closed the door. One moment of peace, that's all he allowed himself. "Martha," he called, "Honey, let's go."

His wife came out, dressed in pants and a lab-coat. She could make anything look good. "You got the message?" she asked.

Matthew grabbed his keys and slipped into his own. "Yep. Merriweather's made a breakthrough." He glanced back at the twin's door and chuckled. "Told them about Avalon again."

She stiffened. A forced smile appeared on her face. "Dear, I really wish you wouldn't."

"It's not like they'll ever know."

His wife shifted. "Yes, but with the project and all, we can't go talking about..." She cleared her throat. "About Subject 001." Dr. Watters shrugged. "Please, do this for me. You dragged me into this. I was against it, but you said..."

"It'll advance our knowledge of extra-dimensional life by hundreds of years. Yeah, I remember." He pulled her close and kissed her. "Keep that in mind. No matter what we do, it's all for a good reason."

She shuddered.

"Promise me another thing," she said.

"Anything."

"They can never know," Martha said, "Mike, Amanda. This is a secret we'll carry to our grave."

* * *

“And let me say again how sorry I am for your loss. Your parents were great people.”

The old man glanced between the two kids before him. “They gave so much to this community,” he continued, “We’ll all miss them.”

Mike, now fourteen and skinny, nodded and forced a weak smile onto his face. His sister looked at the ground and scowled. “Thank you, Rev. Peterson,” the boy said, voice right above a whisper.

The old man hesitated. “There is something I wanted to say.” He fiddled with his jacket’s button. “You two, well, you’re going to have a lot of opportunities to do some real good in this world, like your parents did. You can help a lot of people. I encourage you not to waste it. But even more, remember that not all good things are equal. Don’t let something that’s only ‘good’ distract you from what’s great. That’s, well, if you can do that, you’ll be even better people than your parents.”

Amanda scowled. “Thanks for your, uh, advice. Right now, we need some time alone.”

He patted them both on the shoulder. “I understand. It’s been a long day. One of the longest you’ll ever have. You don’t want to listen to the ramblings of an old man.” He donned his hat and tilted it toward them. “Be seeing you. And remember, my door is always open.”

The boy nodded again. "Thank you for your words today," he repeated, "You were very kind. Really. But, please, be safe."

The old man paused. "You too, Michael." He left.

The girl huffed and threw herself down on a nearby bench. "That's over," she muttered, "I'm taking off these stupid shoes." She tore off her heels like they were scalding metal. The boy loosened his tie. For a moment, neither moved. They avoided each other's gazes and looked to the floor. Then, he sat next to her and pulled her into a hug. Tears came unbidden to her eyes, but she refused to break into sobs. "When's our stupid uncle going to get here?" she muttered.

Someone pounded on the door of the Church. "Hey! Little knuckleheads. You in there? Amanda? Mike?"

Mike sighed. "Right now."

Amanda bristled. "We're inside." The door opened and a scraggly-bearded man in a plaid shirt and faded jeans stepped inside, wiping water from his brow.

Mike pasted a smile onto his face. He hoped Amanda would be on her best behavior. Unlike last Thanksgiving. "Hi Uncle Travis. Doing well?"

The man nodded. "I'm keeping it together," he said, "You two, on the other hand." He gestured toward them. "Car crash, wasn't it? Quick was better than he deserved, but you can't begrudge a dead man that."

"Shut up." Amanda's face darkened.

"Hey, I am all broken up about it too, you know." Their uncle clucked his tongue. "Anyway, I'll be taking care of you two for the next couple of months, until everything

gets sorted out. Moved my stuff in this afternoon.” The twins stared at him. “Oh, and, uh, sorry about your loss and all that.”

Amanda’s face turned red. “You’re not sorry. We invited you every year at Christmas and you never came. I sent you an invitation to our birthday party and you never came. You always hated Mom and Dad. Hated them. Don’t you dare pretend to be sorry.”

Uncle Travis chuckled, and not in the friendly way. “It’s something people say, darling. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“That’s the problem.”

His eyes flared. “If you’re going to hate someone, it’s a waste of time hating me.”

Mike pulled out his book and thumbed through the pages. He wanted no part in this.

“You shouldn’t hate your family!” Amanda snapped, “That’s one of the world’s only rules. Not that you care..”

“Your parents were...” Their uncle stopped himself. He pointed at her. “We’re dropping this, okay? They’re dead. Move on. I know I will. Let’s focus on living together for the next couple of months, hmm? Then, you can forget I exist if you want.”

“I’ll do that,” Amanda said with all the spite she could muster. She grabbed Mike’s arm. “Now take us home. I’m hungry and I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

* * *

Routine. Normalcy. Tedium. These were welcome things. Well, more welcome now than before. Mike lay on his bed and read his book. When nothing was happening, nothing that demanded attention anyway, he had time to do whatever he wanted. His violin case lay in the corner. He could pick it up and play, but later. Yes, later. After he'd finished the last few chapters.

He flipped a page and let out a contented sigh. A good story could make you forget everything. Almost. He settled deeper into the blankets and cushions of his bed, content and even happy until loud shouting came from downstairs. With reluctance, he looked up from the page. Oh not again. Three days, three days, and at least ten different fights. None had gone well. This one would be no different. He debated what to do, but reached for a bookmark. Better go see what this one was about. At least he could do some damage control.

Uncle Travis and Amanda sat across from each other in the kitchen engaged in the farthest thing from civil conversation. Amanda jabbed a finger toward him. "You're supposed to be taking care of us. You're supposed to make sure we get where we need to go."

"Darling," Uncle Travis chuckled but his face was hard, "Richwood is miles, miles out of my way. Closest I'd be is thirty minutes, and that's on a job site that doesn't close until seven."

Amanda's jaw tightened. "I have baseball practice. If I don't get to that field, the coach will kill me."

"Baseball?" Uncle Travis snorted. "Don't you mean softball?"

Amanda's eyes were razor-sharp icicles of doom. "No. No I do not. I'm the team captain of a girls' *baseball* team, understand? Not softball, baseball."

Uncle Travis raised his hands up. "Fine. Whatever. I'm still not driving you all the way over there and picking you up again."

This was as good an opportunity to enter the conversation as any. "I have violin practice tomorrow as well," Mike said with a note of apology.

Their uncle's shoulders slumped. "What am I, a taxi service?"

"I can get a ride home with some friends," Mike offered, "Shouldn't be too hard. But would it be all that difficult to pick Amanda up?"

Uncle Travis mulled it over. "Alright, here's what we'll do. I'll pick you up at seven-thirty, after my work ends."

"Practice ends at six," Amanda said.

"Then find another ride, like Mike here did."

Amanda let out a big, annoyed sigh. "Sure. Bet Tracy's mom would be more fun anyway."

Uncle Travis nodded. "You know, you could be more grateful. You think I like living in this house? You think this is pleasant for me?" He snorted. "Kids these days. I tell you, no consideration for the needs and feelings of others."

Amanda glared daggers at him from across the table. She rose and left. With a sigh, Mike followed her. "Amanda." He grabbed her arm. "Come on, don't be like that."

"Oh, excuse me," she said, "I stand up for myself. For us. I don't lay down and be a doormat. A lesson you could stand to learn."

“You’re making everyone’s life more difficult,” Mike said, “We have enough problems here without you riling Uncle Travis up.”

“Riling him...” She took a nice, calming breath. “Mike, he’s a crusty old sailor whose mother never loved him. He doesn’t need me to rile him up. He’s always riled up.” She poked him in the shoulder. “You know I could use some support. You’ve got your head in a book all the time.”

Mike shrugged. “Books are fun. Life isn’t.”

“Well, if you’re so concerned about life’s ‘problems’, maybe you should stand up and deal with them every once in awhile.”

“If I could jump inside a book, everything would be fine. Books don’t give me problems,” Mike reasoned.

“But I do, you mean.”

Mike started. “Amanda, that’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Save it, Mike,” she snapped, “It’s fine. I’ll deal with real life. You stay in fantasy-land. Like always.”

“Amanda, that’s not...” She slammed her door in his face. “...fair.” He debated knocking and continuing the argument, but then he remembered his book. He’d left Sgt. Jamison in the middle of the Nazi base, and he couldn’t do that. It’d be a travesty. Maybe later, after he’d finished the book, Amanda would calm down and they could talk again. Yep. Good plan. He patted himself on the back and jumped back into it.

* * *

Dinner, if they wanted more than reheated pasta, was a self-help affair. No more of Mom's cooking or Dad's always-ready stash of snacks. Uncle Travis lived on ramen and, as far as he was concerned, they could too. Mike and Amanda disagreed, but no amount of complaining could move him. So, they set about learning how to cook. After a single week, Mike and Amanda had the basics down and could make a nice spaghetti. Nothing like Mom's, but better than pre-packaged meals.

Uncle Travis parked himself in front of the T.V. every night and refused to move or change the channel. The news was all he cared to watch. He leaned forward, eyebrows drawn close together, and muttered to himself. "Well, we aren't dead yet. That's a plus." Mike and Amanda had to wait until he fell asleep, which was mercifully early, in order to claim the remote.

Mike thought it best they try to leave him alone as much as possible. They both had laptops. If they wanted to stream something, they could watch it there. Amanda was reluctant, but he kept at her until she agreed. She was probably looking for more reasons to be mad with their uncle, but he refrained from voicing that opinion. Still, they ate dinner without him whenever possible. Sometimes, they ate in their rooms. Mike's had more pillows and blankets, so his was the location of choice for movies and shows. After two weeks, this became routine.

Tonight was the season finale. Mike leaned forward, food almost forgotten. Guns at the ready, a man and a woman faced off. Smoke billowed from the overloading reactor. Alarms blared a warning for them to get to the escape pods.

“I don’t understand,” the woman said, “You’re doing all this for strangers. You’re sacrificing everything, your life, your home, your happiness, for a narrow tract of land on a backwater planet. Help me understand.”

The man smiled. “Looks like I found something worth fighting for.” They raised their guns and aimed down the sights.

The screen froze.

Mike looked over at Amanda, confused and alarmed. “Hey. Don’t do that.”

“Let’s watch something else,” she muttered.

“It’s the finale! We can’t turn it off now.”

A flicker of annoyance crossed her face. “This show is stupid.”

“But we’ve watched everything up to the finale. We have to finish it now.”

Amanda gestured to the screen. “Look at him. He left Miranda behind, the only person he had left in the world, to go get himself killed. That’s stupid.”

Mike opened his mouth to reply. The doorbell rang. Uncle Travis swore.

“Someone’s at the door,” he shouted up at them.

“Then answer it,” Amanda snapped. The doorbell rang again. Amanda wasn’t moving. Uncle Travis certainly wasn’t moving. Once again, it fell to Mike to get things done. He sighed and set aside his plate.

“I’ll get it.”

“Thanks, kid,” Travis said.

Amanda grabbed his hand. “You don’t have to.” Mike shrugged and went down anyway.

A man stood at the door dressed in a lab-coat. He jumped when the door opened.
“Um, excuse me?” he said, “Is this the, er, Watters residence?”

“Yes,” Mike answered, seeing no reason to lie.

“Dr. Merriweather. Steven Merriweather,” he said and extended a hand to him.
Mike shook it with some hesitation.

“Mike, er, Michael Watters,” he said, “Er, don’t take this the wrong way, but do we...know you?”

“Well, no. That is, not exactly.” The doctor pushed his loose-hanging glasses up his nose. “Not as such. I’m one of your parents’ employees, see. Or I was until...and, well, I apologize for the interruption, but this couldn’t wait.”

“Who is it?” Uncle Travis called.

“Dr. Merriweather,” Mike answered, “One of Mom and Dad’s employees.”

Their uncle appeared at the door as if summoned. His face was red and pulled into a snarl. “Oh no, oh no, no, no. You get out of here. We don’t want you here.”

Dr. Merriweather recoiled. “I assure you, I don’t mean any harm.”

Uncle Travis clenched a fist. “Get out! You and your kind shamed the Watters name. You did something, something evil. And I’ll have nothing to do with it.”

Merriweather giggled. “Michael, was it? I don’t think your uncle is himself right now. Perhaps I should come back later when he’s more sober.”

“He’s always like this,” Mike said with a sigh.

Amanda ran up. “I think Dr. Merriweather should stay.”

With fire in his eyes, their uncle rounded on her. “Amanda,” he said, “Since the day I got here, you’ve been on my back about everything. You don’t like me, and I don’t

like you. However, if there is a single, solitary time where I can get you to do what I say without arguing, I want it to be this. We don't want him here. We don't want anything to do with him."

"When you put it like that, it makes me more curious," Amanda said with an innocent expression, "What are you hiding, uncle? What dirty family secret, hmm? I'll bet it's something you did, and you want to cover it up and blame it on Mom and Dad."

Travis's jaw tightened. "Girl," he said, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh?" Amanda crossed her arms. "Then show me."

"U-um?" Dr. Merriweather pressed his fingers together and smiled. A bead of sweat ran down the tip of his nose. "If I may, I thought, with your parents dead and all, you might want to see some of the projects they were working on. I've been with them for, oh, years now. I have access to everything. It'd be my..." He snapped his fingers, searching for the word. "Condolence gift."

Mike was intrigued. Mom and Dad had never talked about their work. "What sort of projects?"

"Well, er." Dr. Merriweather adjusted his glasses yet again and smiled. "That's, well, that's supposed to be confidential, but..." He sighed. "I suppose you at least ought to know. And I did offer, so what can I say? Now, it sounds a little crazy, but I'm working on, well, portals."

"Portals." Amanda scoffed, "And how close are you?"

"We, well, we have a prototype," the doctor offered, "I could show it to you. It's at the lab, but again, I have access. I could even demonstrate it. We might blow out the

power in the lab. Again. Hopefully it wouldn't be as bad as the last time I did that. But I could show it to you."

Mike grinned. "And it works?"

The doctor nodded. "Oh yes! We've sent a loaf of bread across the room." He glanced back and forth between the three of them. "S-so, how does next week sound? Thursday evening, six o'clock? That's after-hours. I can write down the address with directions for getting there."

Mike nodded. "Sure. Sounds awesome."

"I want to go." Amanda smirked at Uncle Travis.

"Now wait a minute here..." he began

"Great. It's settled." Dr. Merriweather shook Mike and Amanda by the hand. "See you then. Now, uh, if you'll excuse me, my wife is waiting for me at home." Like a rabbit under the gaze of a hawk, he darted away. Uncle Travis shouted for him to come back, even stepped outside the front door, but the doctor jumped in his car and sped away.

Uncle Travis turned back to them. "We're not going."

"We'll go without you then," Amanda said.

"We're not going," he repeated with a growl.

Amanda's face turned a deep shade of red. "You. Are. Not. My. Dad!" she screamed. "You hate him. You don't get to tell me what to do. If you don't respect your own family, then you get no respect from me."

Mike edged along the wall towards the nearest exit.

Uncle Travis turned away and ran his fingers through his hair. “You know what?” he said with a chuckle, “Fine. That’s fine. We’ll go to the lab. Then, I can show you what sorts of people your parents really were.”

* * *

Thursday couldn’t come soon enough. Mike and Amanda piled into Uncle Travis’s truck and drove to the outskirts of town. Mike had his violin in its case. Amanda had her bat. They didn’t think this would take more than a few hours and they both had practice afterwards. The lab was small, “built upon the ruins of the old one”, Uncle Travis told them. Dr. Merriweather met them at the front and ushered them inside.

They enjoyed the tour. A lot of cutting edge tech, still experimental, lay strewn everywhere. Mike listened with rapturous intent to Dr. Merriweather’s glowing descriptions of each item. Even Amanda warmed up to the place. They grew to like him, even though he was very nervous and laughed a little too much at his own jokes.

He led them to a sealed room. Only a wired metal cage and a few tables laden with notes and computers furnished it. Uncle Travis grunted, unimpressed. “A monkey cage? After all those high-tech doohickeys, this is your best shot?”

“I assure you,” Dr. Merriweather said, “It’s much more than that.” He gestured to it with grand, sweeping motions. “That ‘cage’ is the Trans-Dimensional chamber, the ultimate creation of Dr. and Dr. Watters, now under my care.”

Uncle Travis chuckled. “Nah. That’s not their ‘ultimate creation’.” He leaned in close to the doctor. “Why don’t you show us what Matt and his pretty wife were really working on, hmm? Or did it escape once they were dead?”

Dr. Merriweather laughed. “I assure you, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He put his hands in his pockets.

Mike and Amanda ignored their uncle. The portal machine was much more interesting. “How does it work?” Mike asked, “Can you turn it on? Where is the…”

“Shut up,” Uncle Travis snapped. He drove a meaty finger into Dr. Merriweather’s chest. “Stop playing around, doc. You know what I’m talking about. So why not show them? Why not show them what sort of people their parents really were?”

Then, Dr. Merriweather shot Uncle Travis. He whirled on Mike and Amanda, eyes wild.

“Into the chamber,” the doctor ordered, “Both of you.” He brandished his handgun, which shook in his white-knuckled grip. The echo of it still lingered in their ears.

“Uncle Travis!” Mike went to run to the fallen man’s side. Another shot pinged off the tile floor. He came to a screeching halt and stood frozen, eyes wide and staring at the gun.

The doctor tried to dab away the sweat forming on his face with his sleeve. “You would be wise to listen to me right now. I’m not… I’m not in a very stable frame of mind. Who knows what might happen if you don’t do exactly as I say?”

“Put that thing down, doc,” Amanda ordered, “You don’t want to do this. You really, really don’t want to do this.”

“I have to.” His entire body convulsed. “You don’t understand, I have no choice. He won’t stop. He’s...he’s in my head, see. I have to get him to leave.” By sheer willpower, he steadied the gun and pointed it in their direction. “Please, don’t make me shoot you too.”

“Please doctor, what do you want from us?” the boy pled, “Is it money? Revenge? What did we do wrong?”

“Not me. He wants you.” The doctor let slip a nervous titter. He lurched over to a lab terminal and typed as if the devil in all his terror breathed down his neck. The cage door slid open behind the two children. “Michael, Amanda, I’m sorry.”

“Then stop this,” the boy offered, “We can talk this out. I mean, you’ll go to jail now, but isn’t that better than this?”

His face twisted in rage. “I have no choice. Don’t you understand? I don’t want to do this. But I can’t get him out of my head.” He struck his skull with his fist and screamed. “Out, out, out, out, out!” He reeled and caught himself on the desk.

The two teenagers recoiled. “Alright,” the boy said. He put his hands up. “We’re getting in. No one needs to get hurt. No one else needs to get hurt. Don’t do anything...rash.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the girl agreed, “Nothing rash.” She hesitated for a moment. The doctor’s attention was on the screen. He wasn’t even looking their way. Her hands clenched. This was it. Now or never.

She charged. She didn’t shout out a defiant challenge or even scream a battle-cry. Only the pounding of her footsteps warned the doctor of her approach. He looked up in time to see her leap for him. The gun fired once, but the shot went wide and grazed her.

The adrenaline coursing through her veins numbed whatever pain she felt. With a grin, she grabbed the gun with both hands.

“Let go,” the doctor snarled and tried to beat her off. However, days spent in the lab with little-to-no exercise hadn’t prepared him to fight the captain of the girls’ baseball team. She grunted when his fist struck her, but she wrenched his arm back and began prying the gun free. They stumbled over a chair and fell onto the table. Papers, pens, and dust fell all around them. The doctor grabbed the gun with both hands. Amanda bit his arm. The gun fired once more. A shrill male scream tore the air asunder.

Time froze. Amanda forgot the gun and looked for her brother. Mike stood at the entrance to the chamber, shock written on his face. His hands clutched at his stomach. What had happened? Why was blood...? His eyes rolled backwards and he fell. “Mike!” Amanda screamed. The gun was not important anymore. She ran to him and cradled his head. “Mike. I’m sorry. I never meant...I didn’t mean...” Mike stared dully at her and the ceiling.

There is no sound quite like the click of a gun being cocked. It froze Amanda’s heart and her courage quailed. “In the chamber now,” the doctor said with another nervous titter, “I’m not supposed to kill you. I don’t want to kill you. But I’m not in control right now.” He grimaced and held his head like it pained him “Hurry please...”

Amanda’s glare would have caused a sane man to waver, but she took stock of her options and came up short. The doctor had the gun aimed at her now. There would be no second chance to grab it. “Fine,” she said with a growl. Mike’s legs were still across the threshold, so she tried to drag him in, but a cry escaped his lips.

“Amanda...” He hissed through teeth clenched in pain.

“Shh.” She tried to soothe him. “Come on, you big dope. Need you to move your legs.”

“Hurts.”

“Yeah.” She glared once more at the doctor. “Yeah, I know it does.” She wrapped her arms under his shoulders. “Bite down or something.” She dragged him inside the chamber. It proved difficult thanks to the violin case on his back, but she didn’t pause to remove it. His mouth opened in a silent scream, but he didn’t resist. The door slid shut behind them.

The doctor relaxed for a second. Only for a second. His face turned pale. The gun fell from his nerveless hands and he collapsed. “Yes, yes. I...I brought them as you asked. I honored our deal. No, I couldn’t bring the parents. They died little over a month ago. They’re the only ones left, please! I did the best I could. I did my best.” He rocked back and forth. “I did my best...” He straightened. “Send them to you, yes, yes.” He resumed typing, hunched over the keyboard and muttering to himself.

Amanda had never felt the strong urge to strangle someone before. Not even Uncle Travis. Punch him, maybe, but not strangle. She felt it now. Maybe if she smashed some of this stuff, the machine would stop working. Ah, but then the maniac would shoot them or something. Again. She snarled at him when he tossed her bat in the chamber. “Watch it!” She felt a hand take hers and stiffened, but it was only Mike, smiling up at her.

“Amanda,” he said, “I wanted to say thank you.”

She scoffed. “What for? Leading us into a trap? Saying ‘oh, what possible threat could an old scientist be? Let’s take a tour of some creepy lab our parents owned and not tell anyone where we’re going’. Thanks for that.”

“No,” Mike said, “For being...” He coughed and his face scrunched up in pain. “For being my sister. And my friend, even when no one else was.”

The doctor entered one final keystroke and sat back with a blissful smile. “There,” he said, “It’s done. It’s done.” The chamber whirled to life and the a hum built around Mike and Amanda. “Any...” The doctor swallowed. “Any last words, kids?”

“Yeah.” Amanda snapped, “You’re a real piece of work, doc. You know that, right?”

“Dimensional Rift in thirty seconds,” a computerized voice said.

The doctor swallowed. “Well?”

“Well what?” Amanda snapped.

“Not you.” The doctor turned away from them. “I did it. I did what you asked. Please, leave me alone.” He stiffened and his hand groped for the gun. “No, no, no. Please, please, please no.” It found the grip and closed around it. “Mercy. Please, have mercy.” Tears streamed down his face as he raised the gun to the side of his head. “Please, have mercy. I never meant...I never wanted to hurt you. It was them. Their parents made me. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me!”

“He’s not really going to...is he?” Mike whispered.

The doctor took a gulp of air. “I...I wanted to understand. It was all for knowledge’s sake. There’s nothing wrong with looking for answers is there? Oh please,

no. Oh God, someone, anyone. Save me.” He whirled and his wild eyes fixed on Mike and Amanda. “This isn’t me. This isn’t me. This isn’t...have mercy. Have...”

Mike turned his head and squeezed his eyes shut. Amanda couldn’t look away. The sharp report of a gun echoed through the lab and the doctor fell to the floor. Smoke curled from the end of the handgun, now painted a sickly shade of red.

“Five seconds.”

Mike’s arms wrapped around her. “I love you,” he said.

She hugged him, heedless of the blood staining her clothes. “I love you t--”

* * *

Neither the dull chanting nor the flickering green light from the strange fire nor even the pain in his abdomen roused Mike. The dryness in his throat, that aching, gnawing thirst that demands relief and rouses even the deepest sleepers, that did it. It nagged him and harried the back of his mind until he relented. With a long-suffering sigh, he roused himself.

Three hunched shapes wrapped head to toe in dark rags loomed over him, chanting and waving their hands. He stifled a rising yelp. Their forms wavered in the flickering light, revealing long, crooked noses, faces in turn old, skeletal, or swollen, and hands curled into claws. Forget his parched throat. This wasn’t worth a drink. Mike squeezed his eyes shut and pretended to still be asleep.

“The human is awake, sisters.”

Darn it.

“Your grasp of the obvious is as strong as ever, I see.”

“No need to be rude.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Quiet,” an elderly voice quavered. “Human, I command you to wake.”

A cold, clammy hand set itself on Mike’s forehead. He shuddered and knocked it aside. “I’m up, I’m up. What, are your hands made of fish meat?” He yelped and his face scrunched up. Pain lanced through his torso. “Ugh...

“Careful, child,” the swollen woman said, “We patched your wounds, but it will take a while for them to heal yet. The magic has had a few scant hours to work.” She reached to help him lay back down.

“I said don’t touch me!” Mike hunched down like a feral, scared animal. No one had called him a coward yet, but those hands were like a zombie’s or something. Cold, clammy, and chilled with the touch of death..

The trio sprang backwards away from him. Was that a hint of fear in their eyes? Mike looked them over and his heart sank. Witches. They were witches or he was a newt. On second thought, best not to think of newts right now. He shivered. Witches ate kids, right? Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. He giggled. This was the absolute worst day ever. “Who are you?” he asked.

The three exchanged glances. “We are the Ragged Sisters, lord human,” the skeletal one answered with a chuckle.

They linked their hands together in a chain around Mike. “Through fire and stone, from flesh and bone, none shall ever free, these dread sisters three.” They burst into a round of cackling. Mike’s heart hammered in his chest.

Good old Shakespeare. His plays were more accurate than anyone knew.

“And...and what do you want?”

“To serve you and do what you desire,” they said, “Your every wish is our command.”

Mike’s mind whirled. “What...you...huh?” he stammered, “But why would...you mean, you aren’t going to try and eat me then. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m very grateful. I assumed that...well, witches and all that. Eating children is supposed to be your thing.”

“Oh,” The one with the swollen face tittered. “As if we’d last more than a moment against a human.”

“The very idea,” the old one agreed, bobbing her head, “Ridiculous. The magic you wield is more than we could ever hope to match.”

They were saying words, words he understood too. English words. Yet Mike couldn’t figure out how they fit together. “Mag-ic,” he repeated, “The magic I wield. You want me to do magic.”

“Sisters,” the skeletal one said in a hushed tone, “I’m afraid the human’s mind is addled.”

“He crossed the Void Sea, dearie,” the old one countered, “And wounded too. No wonder his mind is confused. We must ensure he recovers if we are to expect to reap the benefits of this alliance.”

“Alliance?” Mike kicked himself inwardly. Good to see the old conversation skills were still there. Repeat a few more words. That would definitely help this situation.

“Of course,” The skeletal witch cackled. “With our powers combined, all of Avalon will fear the might of the Ragged Sister. But child, what is your name?”

“Um.” Mike thought for a moment. “Matthew McConroy. The Third. Of...Norristown.”

The elderly one cleared her throat. “Rest now, human. We have sealed your wound, but it has not healed. Do not fear. You're safe with us.” She turned to the other two. “Bring the cauldron and the meals. They will make a fitting sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?” Oh good job genius. Keep that up! You’ll win a Nobel Prize.

“Rest,” the eldest said.

Mike resisted as well as he could. He couldn’t let himself be captured by witches. But his eyes closed of their own accord. He sank back into the most comfortable feeling of warmth and softness he’d ever experienced. The last thing he heard before he drifted off was, “Dears, do you wonder why our magic has such great effect on him?”

When he next woke up, the sound of screams assaulted his ears. Three tiny voices raced around his head, terrified. His eyes shot open and he sat up way too quickly for his own good. “What in the world is...” He grimaced and clutched his stomach.

“Matthew,” the skeletal sister said brightly, “You’re awake right on time.” A small form shot past her legs with the swollen witch right on its heels.

“Sister,” she snapped, “You could have caught that one. Pay attention.”

An abashed expression crossed the witch’s desiccated face. “Sorry, sister.”

A third witch screamed at both her sisters to come help. Mike’s head swam and his stomach ached, but he sat up anyway. His heart leapt into his throat. Three kids, not older than seven, ran around in the last stages of panic and fright. The witches chased

them, hands extended and curled like claws. The kids were not human either. Two had furry tails and the third fluttered around on gossamer wings. They mewled and shrieked in panic. They dodged between piles of old pots, rusty blades, and three, boiling cauldrons that spewed foul, green smoke.

“Come here, little ones,” the eldest crooned. The three sisters darted left and right, herding them together.

“Please, let us go,” the oldest said, tears in his eyes.

Mike swallowed the knot that appeared in his throat. “Excuse me?” They didn’t hear him over the ruckus. The three kids made a mistake and all ran into the same corner. The witches advanced on them, cackling. “Hey!” A stab of pain went through Mike’s stomach, but he ignored it. “What in the world do you think you’re doing?”

His raised voice made the sisters jump. They were distracted long enough for the three kids to slip away between their legs and scatter throughout the room again. The witches cursed and went after them once more.

The youngest looked to Mike. “Help us, please.”

The swollen sister smirked. “Oh poor, foolish child. He will not help you.” She leaned close. “You see, he is a human.”

The children paled. They backed away from Mike, frightened. The oldest clenched his fists. “You dummies,” he snapped at the witches, “The king says humans are dangerous and not to be trusted. You’re going to get us all killed.”

“We’re dangerous and not to be trusted,” the skeletal one cackled. As one, the sisters leapt upon them and hoisted their struggling forms into the air. The skeletal sister pinched the side of the one she held. “Oh yes. Oh yes. Soft flesh, perfect for eating.”

“Eating.” Horror filled Mike. “Oh no. Oh no you don’t.” Telling off witches now? Great long-term survival strategy. “Er, please don’t. They’re kids.”

The witches paused and looked at him, puzzled. “Would you prefer if they were adults, then?” the swollen one asked.

“No. No one gets eaten,” Mike insisted, “Put them down.” He rose to his feet, which shook and made it hard to stand, and grunted. “Better yet, let them go.”

The witches stared at him, confused. The kids struggled in their grasp, but they were too strong. The wrinkled, elderly one stalked toward him, eyes narrowed. “Sisters, I think we have the wrong sort of human.”

“Intriguing,” the swollen one added, “The White Fox assured us they were all a savage, brutal race who loved nothing better than the domination of others.” She peered at Mike.

“Look.” Mike staggered on his feet. “You want my help? Then do this for me. Let the kids go. Let them go and we’ll have something else for dinner, alright?”

They exchanged knowing glances. As one, they set the kids down and circled him. A cold feeling crept up his back. He felt like a bunch of sharks had figured out he was a tasty fish. “Careful sisters,” the skeletal one hissed, “He is still dangerous. He is still human, after all.”

Mike looked back and forth. This wasn’t going well. Not well at all. “Look, I’m sorry I’m not what you expected, but humans, we don’t. Eat. People. Don’t you have a cow or a chicken you could cook up instead?”

“Cows and chickens.” The wrinkled one’s face wrinkled even more in disgust. “You eat cows and chickens? How do you stand it?”

“Uh.” Mike shrugged. “Barbecue sauce. And the right spices.”

The sisters were intrigued. “What is this ‘barbecue sauce’?”

“Is it magic?”

“Is it deadly?”

“Can you make it here?”

“No, no, and...maybe.” Mike grinned nervously. “Barbecue sauce, it’s...well, it’s a sauce. You put it on food to make it taste better. I...I might be able to remember a recipe. A friend of mine, his Dad makes his own.”

He reached for his violin case, which always had a pencil and some paper to write on, and for the first time realized it wasn’t there. “What did you do with my violin,” he demanded, a little panicked.

The sisters looked pleased. “I told you,” the skeletal one leered, “I told you that it was a thing of great power. Why else would a human be carrying it. And look how concerned he is.”

“Give it back,” Mike demanded, “That was my mom’s.”

“Yes, yes.” The swollen one clomped over to a rickety cupboard and pulled it out. “We were trying to figure out what it did, but we didn’t have any luck.”

Mike dashed across the room and seized it from her. He snapped it open and checked the instrument for any signs of damage. There were none. He sighed in relief and slumped against the wall. The sisters crowded around him.

“Tell us,” the wrinkled one said, “What does it do?”

“Does it cause plagues?”

“Does it destroy cities?”

“Does it raise the dead?”

“No, nothing like that,” Mike answered, alarmed. “Give me a minute and I’ll show you.”

He tuned it, much to the sisters’ interest. Even the kids watched from the corner, fascinated. Then, he pulled out his bow and played the piece he knew best. Mozart had written it and he’d performed it as part of the school orchestra. The soft, lilting tones filled the room with a beauty it had never seen. The ugliness and evil in it for a moment gave way to something better and purer. The sisters and the children stood entranced and didn’t move until he finished with a flourish.

The skeletal one clapped her hands. “Marvelous,” she said with a grin, “Play it again.”

“Yes, again,” the swollen one added.

However, the wrinkled sister was not impressed. Her hands snapped out and slapped the others on their cheeks. “Fools,” she hissed, “He is trying to lay a spell on you.”

“That is like no magic I have ever heard of,” the swollen one protested, massaging her cheek.

“And there wasn’t a shift in the magic of the room. No there wasn’t. Not that I could tell. Not that I could tell.” The skeletal one moved to the corner and sulked.

“There’s no time to argue,” the ancient woman declared, “I presume you haven’t forgotten your duty, though I must say I would not be surprised if you had.”

“We never get the chance to.” The skeletal one stuck her tongue out at her.

Unperturbed, the ancient one snapped her fingers towards the cowering children.
“Get these three into the pot and begin the incantations before the sun reaches its height.”

“Not now. I want to hear the human play again,” the swollen one insisted, glaring at her wrinkled sister.

“And I won’t permit it. There’s no time.”

“Oh won’t you?” With a hoarse scream, the swollen one threw herself at the wrinkled one. They tumbled and fought, biting, scratching, and pulling each other’s hair. The skeletal sister wrung her hands and cried. “I’ll teach you! I’ll teach you!” the swollen one snapped. Mike stepped away from them, alarmed. A flash of inspiration shot through him. He grinned. None of them were paying attention to Mike or the children.

Mike sidestepped over to the corner where the kids were huddled. He smiled at them. “Alright,” he said, “Who here knows the way out?”

The three stared up at him and shied away. “You’re human,” the youngest said, “We can’t trust you.”

“Momma said that humans are the worst,” the oldest agreed.

“I promise, I won’t hurt you,” Mike said. He could tell they doubted him. He glanced over his shoulder. Now the third witch had joined the brawl, trying to separate the other two. Fortunately, she wasn’t having much luck. “Am I worse than getting eaten by those nasty witches?”

“Yes,” the middle child piped up, “Momma said...”

The other two leapt on him and covered his mouth. “When you put it like that,” the eldest began.

“Get us out of here, please,” the youngest begged.

Mike looked around. There was no obvious way out, however. “Do you remember the way you came in?” Mike repeated.

The kids stared at him dully for a moment, but then the light of memory burst into the youngest’s eyes. “I do,” she said. Her wings fluttered and she bit her lip. “It’s this way. Follow me.”

They crept around the edges of the room and slipped out a crack in the wall. A solid, steel door blocked the way. Mike tried the handle. It was unlocked, though heavy and hard to move. Pain flared in his torso, but he pushed through. “Alright, it’s open. Go.”

They squeezed through. A long, dark tunnel lay ahead, with only the faintest glimmer of light up ahead. “Right then,” Mike said, “You all run. Get out of here.”

“What about you?” the girl asked.

Mike patted his stomach. “I’m hurt. I’ll follow you, but you’ll be faster without me. There’s no time.”

They dashed away a little too eagerly. Mike sighed. It was what he told them to do, but a little more reluctance when leaving him to face the witches alone would have been nice. But there was no time for that. With a hand against the wall to support himself, he doggedly made his way toward the light. Halfway there, his breath came in short, ragged gasps, sweat dripped from his brow, and his legs felt weak. His heart hammered away in his chest and filled his ears with its rabid beat. He gritted his teeth and pushed forward. A little farther, come on.

A shrill scream of rage echoed up the tunnel from behind him. He gulped. Sounds like they had discovered his treachery. Time to move faster. For a few moments, a surge

of adrenaline allowed him to move at almost a jogging pace. But pain ate away at his stomach and almost forced him to double over. There was no time. He dragged himself forward.

The sound of pattering footsteps and loud curses pursued him up the hallway. He was close to the exit now. He could see trees and sunlight and the good things of nature up ahead. He reached for it and stumbled. His face met the cold, rough stone. This was it. So much for trying.

No. The light was close. He could still make it. Mike pushed himself to his feet and half-stumbled half-ran the remaining few steps. He collapsed once more, but this time on soft grass and in warm sunlight.

A shriek came from behind him. “You fools!” the eldest witch screeched, “Don’t go into the sun. It will take weeks to heal.”

Mike rolled onto his back and saw the three sisters standing not five feet away, trapped in the shade of the cave’s entrance. He started to laugh, a sound born of relief and joy. They could only glower down at him.

“Beware, human,” the swollen one said, “We could have sheltered you. Hidden away, you could have rested and regained your strength. But you chose to betray us instead. Now you will face the dangers of this world without our help and guidance.”

Mike laughed in their faces. “If my books were good for anything, they at least taught me to never trust the help of witches.”

She grabbed the other two by the arm. “Come, sisters. We must make other preparations” Together, they withdrew into the cave and left Mike out in the noonday sun.

He sat up, breathing heavily and with an aching middle but free and alive. Today was a good day. “Alright, where to now?” he asked himself, “I suppose any direction is as good as another.” He rose once more to his feet and stumbled away from the cave. “But I like this one best.”

He stumbled down a small slope before he heard the leaves rustling behind him. He turned, fearful that the witches were springing some sort of trap, but it was only the three kids. They looked at him with solemn, serious expressions and no small amount of concern. “You’re hurt,” the girl said.

“Yep. Ha, ha, ow.” Mike leaned his back against the nearest tree. They crowded around him and tried to stand him back up.

“Come on,” the oldest of the three said, “We know a place where you can get help. My mom is a healer and she can call the Royal Guard on those witches.”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “But aren’t I the big, scary human?”

The middle one shuffled his feet. “Yes, but not a bad scary. A big scary.”

“I’m sure if you explain what happened,” the oldest said, “they’ll let you go free.”

“Here’s a better idea,” Mike countered, “Don’t tell anyone what I am, alright? Can you do that for me? Think of it like a game.”

“Sure,” they agreed, though with some wary glances.

Mike smiled. “Lead on then. This, well, this wound isn’t getting any less painful.”

* * *

Amanda plunged head-first into cold water. The shock of it almost drove the breath from her lungs, but years of athleticism trained her body to act on its own without direct input from her mind. She swam for the surface and took a huge gulp of air as soon as she breached it.

She was in a harbor of sorts. Not a modern harbor by the looks of it, but not an old one either. The ships moored at the docks had more in common with the old sailing vessels than speedboats, cruise liners, oil tankers, or anything of the sort, but they weren't the same. They didn't have sails or rigging, for one, yet their hulls were still made in those familiar old shapes. Some were of wood, but others were made of stranger material. It was hard to tell, but it didn't seem like they were touching the water either.

Yet they were all a far way off and not her current problem. She knew enough about swimming to enjoy a sunny day at the pool, but not enough to thrive on open water. If she stayed out for too long, she'd grow tired and sink. But she wasn't even sure she had the strength to swim to shore.

"Mike," she called again, "Mike. Where are you?"

The ring of a bell came to her on the wind. She turned and saw one of those ships surging towards her from the open ocean. A figure leaned over the edge, not quite human but human enough for someone in danger of drowning. She stuck her hands as high as they could go in the air and waved. "Over here!"

She saw the figure glance her way and jump to his feet. He disappeared backwards. Moments later, the ship turned towards her. Great. Now, if she could find where Mike fell in, everything would be great. She searched around. "Mike!" she screamed with all her might. There was no response.

A sailor dove off the side of the ship, a rope trailing behind him, and paddled towards her. He looked like some sort of thin, pointy-eared dog. The name wasn't coming to mind. A jackal. That was it. The rope was tied around his waist and his hands, which were more like paws, were free to grab her. "Come on, miss," he said, "Let's get you out of this water, eh?"

"Have you seen Mike?" she demanded.

He tilted his head to the side in that way that dogs do. "What's a Mike?"

"My brother. Mike. Did he fall in here somewhere?"

The sailor shook his head. "Can't say that we saw him, though the lookout would know better. Let's get onboard. No one likes spending time in the Void Sea."

Amanda allowed herself to be hauled up onto the deck. The rest of the crew crowded around her, asking questions like, 'who are you?' 'Why were you in the water? Are you daft?' and the like. "Hold," a loud, commanding voice rose over the crowd. They parted before a reptile-skinned person, the captain if her outfit meant anything, wearing a feathered hat with a cutlass at her side.

"Give her space," the captain hissed, "cabin boy."

Amanda's rescuer jumped to attention. "Yes, captain?"

"Good job. Now hurry and fetch her a blanket."

"Yes captain." He saluted and dashed off.

Amanda stepped forward. "Did any of you see anyone else fall in? Anyone?" The crew exchanged confused glances and shook their heads. Amanda gritted her teeth. This was going nowhere. "Who's the lookout?"

“I am, miss,” a crusty old sailor said, “But I didn’t see no one ‘sides you. And Rui saw you before even I did.”

“Maybe he should be your lookout,” Amanda said with a scowl. The sailor cleared his throat and ducked his head.

“Thank you for your opinion,” the captain snarled.

Amanda ignored her and began pacing. The cabin boy came back with a blanket. Amanda calmed down a little. It was cold with the wind blowing on deck and her soaking wet. She remembered the tumult, the light, the whirling round and round and the feeling of Mike slipping from her grasp at the last second. “He’s somewhere else,” she muttered. The sailors were exchanging glances. A few of them tapped their heads and winked knowingly. “Uh, hey everyone. Where can I find the local authorities? I need to find my brother.”

The captain pointed to the port. “Port Royalty. Our destination. Largest port in Avalon.”

Amanda started. “Avalon,” she repeated, “Right. Of course. Well that’s peachy.”

The captain ignored her. “We’re putting in within the hour. Make yourself comfortable until we do. Then, if you’re not going to start paying, get off my ship.”

Amanda sat down, wrapped the blanket around her. Avalon, the place of bedtime stories and books. Avalon, the thing that had started Mike on his love of books. Avalon, the place her father had made up. It couldn’t be real, but it was. Dad, perhaps he knew something. Or maybe she was dreaming. She shook her head. Oh forget this. Focus on what was important. Mike, he was somewhere out there. She hoped. And she was going to keep hoping until proven otherwise.

She set her gaze on Port Royalty. The instant they got to shore, she would leap off the ship and run to the authorities. They would be of some help. They had to be.

* * *

The guard post was smaller than she expected. A two-story building, made from the same material as the ships, sat crammed between two houses. Here, she would find help. Here, everything would be set right. She'd be reunited with Mike, they'd figure out a way home, everything would be great. "Chin up, head high," she told herself, "There's no time to stand around and feel sorry."

Laughter and the sound of clinking glasses greeted her in the guard-post. Two creatures, one made of rocks and the other small and squat like a garden gnome, sat at a table with cards laid out before them. The gnome leaned back, a tankard full of an orange-yellow drink pressed against his lips while the rock-monster fumbled with the cards in his hands. Amanda barged towards them. "Be with ya in a minute," the rock-monster rumbled.

Amanda ignored that. No good in waiting around for some idiot guards to decide to talk to her. She pulled up a third chair and plopped it down beside them. Before they could reprimand her, she blurted out, "I need to know where my brother is. I lost him. What can I do?"

Their expressions turned serious and businesslike. The game lay forgotten. The short one stood on his chair and cleared his throat. "Well miss, you can fill out a missing

person's form and we can send it along to the Royal Offices for analysis." He patted his pockets and produced a thick sheet of papery stuff.

"Wonderful." She snatched it and began scanning the page. Not too hard to fill out. Shouldn't take more than ten minutes. "How long will that take to get this processed?"

"Er." The gnome scratched his beard. "By rights, I'd say it won't come until the end of the week. Or later."

No, that couldn't be the answer. Amanda slammed a fist down on their table. "That's not good enough!" The two guards flinched and the gnome reached for his belt. Amanda calmed herself down. "Look. He could be in danger right now."

"I understand, miss," the gnome replied, "But there is nothing we can do from here."

"He's so space-brained," Amanda continued, "He'll take one look at this place and think he's destined to be some sort of hero. He'll find some air-headed adventure and get himself hurt. He'll..." She fought back tears for a moment, forcing them down with sheer willpower. "If I never see him again, I will forever blame you."

The pair exchanged uncomfortable glances. "Now look here miss," the rocky one said, "There's no call for that. Tell you what, you fill out that form, and we'll send it off immediately instead of with the other reports.

"Will that help?" she asked.

“No. Not really, no.” The rocky one cleared his throat. “The Central Office has a system, see. If you want to bypass it, I suggest you travel to Avalon Palace yourself and petition the King.”

“He’s a good king,” the gnome added, “Explain the situation and he’ll help you. He’s very kind.”

Amanda calmed down. She was still seething, but there was at least a better option than sitting on her rear end all day. “And how would you suggest I get to Avalon Palace?”

“You’ll need to pay for a seat on the Underground Speedway,” the gnome said with a wink.

“Underground Speedway.” Amanda shook her head. “And what is that, some sort of subway?”

The guards frowned. “Not sure what you mean by that,” the garden-gnome said, “But it’s the pride of my people. Three golders and you’re good to go.”

Amanda’s heart sank. One problem after the other. “I don’t have that,” she said, “Unless they take a credit card.” It was a stupid idea. She felt dumber for saying it. As if they would ever be able to collect across dimensional barriers. Not unless Doctor Merriweather’s cursed machine became an everyday device.

“No foreign currency here,” the stone man scolded, “If you need good, solid golders, go to the Royal Exchange. They’ll take most anything there, what with all the traders that come through here.” He nudged the form back towards her. “But first, I suggest you get this all squared away.”

Amanda slumped down and began scribbling away. The guards rose to leave. “Poor kid,” the rock monster said and patted her on the back, “Good luck and good hunting. The kingdom’s a lot less friendly of a place now.”

* * *

‘Most anything’ turned out to be ‘nothing Amanda had on her’.

“I’m sorry, miss,” the teller, a cat-sized dragon, said, “But I don’t think we have any exchange rate for your ‘colored bills’.” He held up a wad of her soaked money.

“Dollar bills,” she corrected.

The dragon didn’t bat an eye. “Naturally. Now do you have any serious business or has this been a waste of both our times?”

She pulled out her smartphone. Maybe not the best idea to hand advanced technology over. Mike would berate her for ‘breaking the non-interference clause’ and ‘interfering with the natural development of a primitive people’, but she was desperate. Besides, these people didn’t seem all that primitive, only different. Other. “What about this?”

The dragon looked askance at her. “Is it real money this time?”

“Not exactly, but it costs quite a lot back home.”

The dragon huffed and a little puff of smoke escaped his nostrils. He took her phone in his claws and examined it. “No gold, no silver, no gems.” He slid it back to her. “What makes this valuable?”

Amanda turned on the screen, or at least tried to. It refused to so much as flicker. “It’s damaged, but it can, uh, you can talk to people across the world on it, store a lot of data, and...”

“So in other words, even if it was valuable, it’s now broken and is therefore worthless,” the dragon said, “Thank you, have a good day. Next.”

“Wait, I only need five golders. Five,” Amanda pled.

The tiny dragon glared down at her. “Then I suggest you search for work and contribute something valuable to society. Next.”

Amanda wandered out of the bank in a daze. A job? She’d never had a job. Mom and Dad’s research grants had provided very well for them. What could she do? Hit things really hard with her bat? Who would hire a fourteen-year-old girl as a bouncer? And even if she did get hired, what good would a bat do against someone with skin made from stone or metal or wood? But she had to try, try and find someone that would pay her. And she did. For hours.

Oh yes, find a job. Wasn’t that a swell idea? Brilliant. If you had a job, you could get money. If you had money, you could buy a ticket. If you had a ticket, you could get to the Palace. If you got to the Palace, you could free Mike. Amanda stood stock still, a frozen smile plastered onto her face. But no one would offer her a job, would they? No, they “didn’t need help right now” or “had too many workers already” or even said she “wasn’t the sort of person they were looking for.” Everyone had an excuse, and this jerk was no exception.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” she said in a too-sweet tone.

“Exactly what I said,” the feather-faced man replied, “Do you even know what we do here?”

“As long as it can earn me five golders, I don’t care.”

The man scoffed. “This is a branch of the Magical Research Institution. We can’t have unskilled children running about, knocking things over, creating cataclysmic imbalances, and leveling up half the town.”

“Half the town you say?” Amanda definitely wanted in now. If this stuff could make a bomb, she could use that to blow her way into wherever Mike was held. She raised her right hand and put her left over her heart. “How about this? I solemnly swear that I will not destroy the town. There, everything’s better. See?”

The man chuckled humorlessly. “No means no.” He slammed the door in her face.

“Hey, come back.”

“Good day, child.”

“If you’d wait one minute, I’m sure we could....”

“I said ‘good day’.” The air twisted around her and threw her off the front porch. Amanda’s mind refused to believe her senses. Impossible. Air didn’t move like that. Not naturally.

“Right, magic,” she muttered, “Fine. Be that way. I don’t need you lot.” She dusted herself off and stomped away, but someone’s foot snaked out and tripped her.

“Hey,” she shouted, “Watch it.”

“Sorry.” A huge man towered over her. Amanda felt a flash of fear. His biceps were as thick as her waist. “Wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Sure he wasn't. That trip felt very intentional. "Don't do it again," she snapped. A woman stepped up behind her.

"I apologize for my partner. I told him to get your attention, but I never specified what method."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Amanda made to push past them, but the woman laid a hand on her arm.

"Now, tell me," the woman said in a soft, sweet voice, "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

Amanda stepped away from them both and chuckled. "Oh, this must be normal around here. Walk up to strangers, trip them, and then start asking questions. Shining beacons of courtesy, you are."

The woman smiled. It was not friendly expression. "Only to some. Now please, answer the questions."

"Will you give me five golders if I do?"

"Five golders for two questions? Why, that'd be highway robbery," the woman said with a chuckle, "And, well, you don't want to know what we do to highwaymen." The man grinned and cracked his knuckles.

Amanda already didn't like these people. The man looked like he stepped off the cover of Manly Men Monthly and the woman had a dagger at her side. She glanced around. Everyone was pointedly avoiding looking at them. Great. No help from the peanut gallery then. "I really should be going then," she told them, "I've got to find five golders, see."

"Why?" the woman asked, "Why that amount?"

“I don’t have to answer that,” Amanda said.

“Oh, but you do,” the woman insisted.

“Right,” Amanda drawled, “Let me guess, ‘the king commands it’ or something of the sort.” She shrugged. “I’m buying a train ticket.”

The woman nodded, but her eyes narrowed. “Another question, then. Answer this: what are the Five Laws which govern this land?”

Amanda decided she’d had enough. “That’s it,” she snarled, “Goodbye. Have a nice day. I hope never to see you again, jerks.” She went to push her way free, but the man blocked her with a growl. She reached for her bat, not that it would help her much. Maybe she could bruise his bicep or something.

“No,” the woman told him, “Let her go. We’ll be seeing each other again very soon.”

Amanda couldn’t run away fast enough. Stupid Feyfolken and their stupid land. Why did fairy-tales have to be real all of the sudden?

Her stomach rumbled. Well, that was one thing that remained constant. Food, she needed food. She wouldn’t do Mike any good if she collapsed from hunger. Maybe they would let her eat the scraps. If so, she better pick a place that made good food and had good scraps. She chuckled. My, how low she’d sunk in the space of a few hours. Hoping for scraps like some dog.

She settled on an inn called the Laughing Boar. It was clean, smelled like ambrosia if ambrosia was made of steak, and was filled with a cheerful, happy crowd. Many of them were sailors or farmers, but they seemed the richer sort who put on airs of respectability. Maybe they were respectable. Maybe in this place, sailors didn’t have the

reputation they had back home. She didn't know, nor did she care to. The innkeeper was her goal, the innkeeper and food.

She went up to the bar where he stood, cleaning out a mug with a towel. He carefully wiped it and placed it almost tenderly on the shelf behind him. "Excuse me?" she asked. His bearded face turned towards her. It was a very impressive beard that only allowed his nose and his eyes to poke out. "I was wondering if you had any food."

"Sure do, lass," he said in a hearty voice, "What do you take me for? That bonehead Corma down by the docks? I've got food for any appetite."

Amanda smiled. "Don't take this the wrong way and all, but that's the best news I've heard all day."

He winked. "You're in luck. Tonight's special is the roast. Done to perfection with me family's secret spices." He kissed his fingers and laughed. "It's not to be missed, I'll tell you that."

That sounded wonderful. Her mouth watered at the thought. "I'd love that. But, well, there is one problem."

"What's that, miss?"

"I don't have any money."

The innkeeper peered at her. "Hmm, you've taken a swim, haven't you? I'll bet you're that girl Captain Gale and her crew hauled out of the Void Sea this morning. Don't know which wizard you crossed to end up in that predicament, nor do I want to." He chewed a stray strand of his beard for a moment. "Tell you what, tell you what. My wife does the dishes and waits the tables and me son is the cook. If you were to wash up,

make things a bit easier on her old back, I'd gladly give you a full meal and a place to stay for the night. How does that sound?" He extended a swarthy hand across the bar.

In an unfamiliar situation, confidence was the most important thing one could have. Without hesitation, Amanda shook his hand and smiled. "I would like that. But is there any chance I could eat before I start?"

The innkeeper laughed. "Of course, lass. We wouldn't want you working on an empty stomach, now would we?"

Despite everything, the meal lifted her spirits. And washing dishes was no different here than it was back home. Scrape off the chunky bits, stick it in boiling water, and put it in the dishwasher. Though in this case, the dishwasher was some sort of chest that glowed when activated. Magic, it had to be, though a very mundane and uninteresting sort.

Amanda's day ended with the realization that, while she was fed and had a nice, if cramped, room to herself, she was no closer to earning golders. With a heavy heart, she prepared to go to sleep. This could all be dealt with in the morning.

"It looks like you're in a bit of a predicament," someone said.

She jumped to her feet and searched about for her bat. "Alright, you sneaky troll. Show yourself." There was no one. She was alone in the room. "I mean it. I'm not in the mood for screwing around here."

"Calm down," the voice said, "Please."

"Calm down? Calm down." Amanda tried to determine the direction it came from but couldn't. She resorted to glaring at the sky. "Someone sneaks into my room in the middle of the night and tells me to calm down? And after I've had the worst day in a

long, long time? I will not calm down, thank you very much. Not unless I want to. If you want me to calm down, show yourself.”

The strange voice let out a long-suffering sigh. “I can’t.”

Oh, of course that was the answer. “And why’s that?”

“Because I don’t have a body right now.”

A chill ran down Amanda’s spine. “Are you a ghost?”

Laughter filled her ears. “A ghost? No. I am still alive, but my body and I were, ahem, ‘separated’. Which is why I need your help.”

“Right.” Amanda threw herself back into bed. “No thanks. Got enough problems on my own. Don’t need yours in addition.”

“Forgive me for asking,” the Voice said, ignoring her proclamation, “But are you human?”

Amanda was tempted to ignore him in turn, but she decided against it. “Who wants to know?”

“A friend.”

Amanda chuckled. “Right, sure. Of course the voice in my head is a friend. I mean, what other possible explanation could there be. Definitely not dangerous and totally trustworthy. But yes, I am human.”

“Then allow me to give you some advice.”

Amanda shrugged. “Alright, go ahead.”

“Don’t tell anyone that.”

“Oh? And why not?”

“The people in this land think that you're going to destroy them. They fear humans because of the lies told to them by their king.”

“Uh-huh, right.” Amanda plopped down and rubbed her forehead. “This day gets better and better doesn't it? Wait a minute...” She sat bolt upright. “Mike. Do you know where Mike is?”

“Yes.”

Now she was on her feet. “Then tell me. Now. I need to know.”

“He has been captured by the King of Avalon and faces probable execution.”

Amanda's heart skipped several beats. She sank down onto her knees.

“No...please tell me that's not true.”

“I'm afraid it is. However, I believe we can help each other.” The Voice ‘cleared its throat’. “On an island not far from here, there is a sword. I believe you have heard of it. It belonged to a man named Arthur. Excalibur, he called it, though it has gone by many names. Only the King of Avalon or a human may wield it, and only a human can use its full power. Go to the King's Island, where the sword lies, and take it for yourself.”

“How far away is King's Island?”

“A few days by boat.”

Amanda shook her head. “Then that'll take too long. You say Mike's going to be executed and then tell me to turn around and run the other way? Heck no.” She shouldered her bag and made for the door. “I don't care if I have to walk. I'm headed to this Palace of Avalon tonight.”

“I would not advise that.”

“Yeah? Well leave then.”

The Voice sighed. “You’ll want to head north if you’re headed to the palace..”

“Thanks.” Amanda stormed out the back door of the inn and into the back alleyway. The stars were different here. Much brighter. She didn’t care. “Which way is north?”

“Turn right.”

She did and ran smack-dab into two cloaked figures rounding a corner. “Excuse me,” she said and tried to force her way past, but an arm blocked her way. A familiar, hairy arm the size of a tree-trunk. Amanda took a second look. Oh wonderful. The pair from the market. The ones with all the questions.

“This the one from before?” he asked his partner.

“That’s her,” the second agreed in a sultry, honey-laden voice. Her hand, a thin, pale thing, drew a dagger and pointed it at Amanda. “Come with us,” she ordered, “It turns out, we still need to talk about something.”

Amanda’s heart hammered in her chest, but rage swallowed up any fear. This realm, this place, it was full of danger. These things weren’t humans. Living and thinking, yes, but not humans. They would kill her if she let them. “Out of my way,” she ordered, “Out of my way or I’ll beat your heads in.”

The woman backed up in alarm, but the man stepped forward with a snarl. His limbs grew longer and thicker, his nose became black and pointed, his mouth turned into a maw, and his entire form swelled into a hunched, horrible thing with fur and claws.

“Oh.” Amanda had never seen a werewolf before. “Oh.” The movies hadn’t prepared her for the horrible reality. His eyes bored into hers and panic overwhelmed her mind. She turned to run, but he was upon her in an instant. She expected the sharp feeling

of rending claws and tearing teeth, but instead he shoved her into a giant bag and threw her across his back. She tried to shout for help, but a strong blow stunned her and kept her silent.

The next thing she knew, she was lying before a pool of water that illuminated a small, stone chamber. The woman and the wolf sat across from her, waiting. The woman read a book while the were-wolf ate raw meat. She wasn't sure what it had been, but she didn't want to know either.

"Nice place" she snapped, "The ambiance is to die for."

The woman didn't look up. "You're the girl that they pulled from the sea, correct?" she asked.

"Go die in a hole."

"Charming." The woman closed her book. "I don't believe you comprehend your position. We're with the Royal Inquisitors. It is our duty to protect the citizens of this fair land from any threats. You, my dear, are such a threat. Perhaps the greatest that has walked this land since the rebellion."

"Well golly-gee" Amanda rolled her eyes. "Don't you know how to make someone feel welcome. You all have some issues if this is how you treat anyone who comes to town."

"Oh please," the woman laughed, "All of the Inquisitorial Corps are trained to recognize a human on sight." The werewolf leered at her. "Now, step into the pool."

"Why?"

"Because I said so," the woman snapped.

The Voice spoke to Amanda. “Do not enter that pool. Hold them off for a few more minutes. My followers are on their way.”

Amanda scooted backwards. “I’d rather not.”

“You don’t have a choice,” the woman insisted, “If you do not, my friend here will throw you in. And let me tell you, if that happens, the consequences will be much worse.”

Amanda glared. “So, what’s this pool do?”

The woman smiled. “This pool is enchanted with a truth-spell, dear. Any question we ask, you will be compelled to answer or suffer pain. If you do not enter it willingly, there will still be pain.”

“And what are the side-effects?”

The woman’s smile widened. “When we are done, you will die.”

Amanda’s heart leapt to her throat. “Oh, well in that case, I’ll hop in...not. What sort of idiot do you take me for?”

“The kind who will, eventually, have no choice in the matter.”

“Then I’ll delay the inevitable for as long as possible,” Amanda countered.

“We have all night,” the woman answered.

“Don’t I get a last request or anything?”

The woman hesitated. “Explain.”

“A minute or two to prepare for death. A jelly doughnut. I don’t know, lady.”

Amanda glared. “Actually, a minute sounds pretty good. I’ll take that.”

With a shrug, the woman returned her attention to her book. “As you wish. I suggest you pray to God, for you will be meeting him soon.”

Amanda huddled against the wall and waited. She pretended to pray, but really she watched. A green mist filtered in from above. It crept towards the two Inquisitors. They didn't notice, at least not in time. They were focused on her. The green mist lashed out and poured itself down their throats. With a garbled, choking sound, they collapsed.

The mist swirled together and became a ragged, thin woman. She held out a hand to Amanda. "Come, let's go," she said.

Amanda nodded. "You don't have to tell me twice."

* * *

Seated by a roaring fire, a warm drink in her hand, Amanda talked with the Voice. Three creatures sat around her, the woman who had saved her, a hulking figure that looked for all the world like the bride of Frankenstein, and a figure in a red cloak. Not the most cheery bunch, but they had saved her from Wolfy McWolf-face and his dark-eyed beauty. "These are your followers?" she asked.

"Yes. They are those who, after our rebellion failed, remained loyal to me and still serve me in my imprisonment."

"And you need me because...?"

"You're the only one who can wield Excalibur."

"Right." Amanda sighed. "Explain why you need it."

"Ask for the mirror."

Amanda turned to the people clustered around her. "I need 'the mirror'." The red-hooded man reached under his cloak and handed her a simple pane of glass.

“Look into it,” the Voice instructed. She did so, but instead of seeing her reflection, she saw a golden grove, like a forest of maples during Fall. In the center of it, a half-buried sword shone “That is Excalibur, the sword which gives any human who wields it the power to face any foe in battle and come out victorious.” The scene changed. She saw rank upon rank of steel-clad soldiers marching by, bearing an emblem of a golden tree. “You saw a small portion of the strength of the Royal Guard tonight. Without it, you will never be able to reclaim your brother.”

“Yeah.” She hadn’t thought of that part of the situation before.

“You will go to the island, you will claim the sword, and with it, you will free your brother and overthrow the King. That is what we want. You alone have the power. You alone can help us. You alone can save your brother. My followers will aid you however they can, but you must lead the way.”

Amanda closed her eyes for a long moment. “I guess I need a ship,” she said at last.

* * *

A roaring fire by his feet, a bowl of delicious soup on his lap, and a blanket tucked around his shoulders made for an excellent evening. Mike sighed in contentment. This was the life. Eating good food inside a farmhouse, yep. Much better than some dark cave.

The three kids had finished their tenth retelling of how Mike, ‘the great and powerful’, had cast a spell on the witches and thrown them into confusion despite having

a dagger stuck in his stomach. The story grew more dramatic each time they told it.

However, they hadn't yet mentioned that he was human.

"Would you like some more cider?"

Mike smiled up at his hostess. "Yes please, Mrs. Willow. Thank you."

"No, thank you." She reached over and poured him a third glass. "You're truly brave. My children and I will always be in your debt."

"Couldn't agree more," Mr. Willow, who was the closest to the big green giant that Mike had ever seen, said.

Mike puffed out his chest a little. This was how an adventure should be. Human arrives in mysterious land, becomes hero, and saves the day. That's how the books did it. Of course, most characters spent a few days trying to get home before they accepted their destiny, but most of them weren't terribly bright either.

He sipped the cider. "It's good."

Mrs. Willow laughed. "That's your third. I should hope so."

"It tastes like apple, but there's something else in with it."

"Ah, ah, ah," she said with a secretive smile, "I'm not going to tell you. It's my own recipe. I can't hand it out. Best cider in Avalon too, if I do say so myself."

Mike blinked. "Avalon," he repeated, "Wait, wait, wait. Hold the phone. Back up. Avalon. That's where I am." He grinned. A chuckle escaped his lips. "I never dared hope, but here I am and here you are ." He took another swig of the cider. Best day ever. He was in Avalon, home of fairy-tales and King Arthur and bedtime stories. If ever there was a land where a human could be a hero, it had to be the resting place of the greatest human

king who ever lived. Who knew? Maybe he'd even get to see Excalibur. "And this is the best stuff I've ever tasted. You're a master at your craft."

Mrs. Willow looked puzzled. "Forgive me if I seem rude," she said, "But you're not from here, if I understand you correctly."

"No, no I'm not." Mike raised his glass. "But happy to be here and looking forward to some grand adventures."

"But you must know how you came here," she insisted.

"Oh sure." Let's see, he didn't want to explain the concept of 'science' right now. Better use something she'd understand. "A wizard did it."

"A wizard, eh?" Mr. Willow's eyes narrowed. "You'll want to mention that to the guard tomorrow."

"You called the guard. Good." Mike finished off the cup of cider. "I'll show them where the cave is." He set the cup down. Alright, Mike, good start. Now say something heroic. "I swear to you, by this time tomorrow, those witches will be gone forever." Eh. It'll do.

"Well, if you're as powerful as my children seem to think you are." Mr. Willow patted the eldest on the head. "I'll hold you to that."

Mike cursed inwardly. Great going. What if the guard can't handle the witches? "How many people are coming?"

The farmer looked to his wife and shrugged. "We'll see in the morning."

* * *

Mike slept in the attic. He expected to be cold, but thick, fur blankets and the fire downstairs kept him nice and toasty. He wondered where the fur came from. Some of the people here had fur. There had to be animals. They wouldn't skin someone else and make fur blankets. Of course not. That's something witches did.

When the sun rose, he continued sleeping. When the sweet smell of breakfast wafted up to him, he shot out of bed and downstairs. Mrs. Willow sat waiting for him. She greeted him with a smile. "Good morning," she said, "You slept late, so I reheated your soup on the stove."

"Late?" Mike glanced outside. The sun wasn't even a few inches above the horizon yet. "Right. You all are farmers. You were up before the sun I'll bet."

"You'd win, if you could find someone to take that wager," she said, "My husband took the children to go see the guards ride in."

Mike grinned. Knights in shining armor. Literal shining armor. "Let me gobble down this soup and I will join them,"

Soon, he'd be off on a grand adventure. Doubtless there was some great evil lurking about that he could slay, right? Sure there was.

Shouts came from outside as he finished his breakfast and the sound of horses and wagons. Mrs. Willow looked up. "I didn't expect them to send this many."

Mike went to the window. There were quite a few more than he expected. At least fifty men marched in front of a silver carriage. All wore full-plate. "Wow, uh." He scratched the back of his head. "That's not quite the guard I imagined."

"The Royal Guard," Mrs. Willow said, "They sent the Royal Guard. And that's the Prince's carriage. Prince Rafe is here."

Mike studied the carriage. A prince, huh? Well, princes often accompanied heroes on their adventures. Or they were the protagonist. Mike grinned. “I want to meet him.”

* * *

Mike had only a few minutes to wait. While the Royal Guard set up a camp around the farmhouse, the Willow family went about their daily chores and left him alone in the house. Mike discovered that patience was not one of his virtues. When the door opened at last, he let out an annoyed sigh of relief.

A fox. The prince was a fox. Granted, a giant fox that walked on two legs and dressed in a red mage’s robe, but a fox nonetheless. The fox puffed out his chest and pointed to himself with a bombastic gesture. “I,” he said with the utmost seriousness, “I am Rafe, the Prince of Avalon and hero of the land. Son of the King, grandson of the other king, great-grandson... Oh, you get the idea.” He cleared his throat. “Let me try that again. Let’s go with, ‘Rafe Starchaser, at your service’.” He bowed. “Prince, pyromancer, illusionist, and the conqueror of ladies’ hearts. How does that sound? Heroic?”

“Oh, uh, yes.” Mike agreed. Tell the fox what it wanted to hear. “Very heroic. Like something from a book.”

At the word ‘book’, Rafe’s eyes lit up. “Yes. That’s what I was hoping for.” He rifled through his robe and pulled out one titled, ‘Tales of Chivalry’. “I’ve read the stories of heroes all my life. Someday, my story will be among them.”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yes indeed.”

Mike sat back. A grin spread across his face. “Avalon is in need of heroes. You have enemies to fight, destiny to fulfill. Those sorts of things.”

“Enemies?” Rafe held up a paw and grinned. Flame sprouted from his palm and burned bright. “Not when I’m done. I’m going to take them all on. Cultists, humans, beasts, anything. I’ll be the greatest hero the world has ever seen.”

Mike stiffened. He wasn’t too keen on humans either, eh? Great. How could he save the world if he was a villain? Well, he wasn’t the villain, but he didn’t want to be mistaken for one. “Sounds great,” he said.

“Thank you, I’m rather fond of it.” Rafe plopped down on the edge of his bed. “What about you? What’s your name?”

“Mike Watters.” He didn’t want to conceal it from the prince. He felt more wholesome and good than the witches.

Rafe frowned. “The others said it was Matthew.”

“I lied to the witches,” Mike admitted, “I’d, well, where I come from there are stories that say if a witch knows your name, they can lay a curse on you. And the kids already knew me as that. So I never bothered to correct it.”

Rafe nodded. “Fortunately, the art of True Naming is not well-known, but that was a wise precaution.” He clapped his paws together. “Then it’s decided.”

“What’s decided?”

“Mike Watters, for your bravery and selfless actions, I want to offer you a position in the Royal Guard.” Rafe extended a paw. “The land needs more people like you. I need more people like you. Heroes tend to have friends, you know. Companions

that they can depend upon. So, if you don't have any objections, I would like you to join me."

Mike sat in astonishment. This was exactly what he wanted. Perfect. Oh, but first, modesty. "You don't even know me."

"It is my right as prince to extend the invitation to any worthy subjects. And, well, I know your heart or at least some of it. You could have left them behind, but you sent them ahead and put yourself in danger for their sakes." Rafe smiled. "You're the sort of person this world needs protecting it."

Heck yeah. Mike celebrated in the safety of his own head. However, there was still a problem. He leaned forward. "In that case, I should tell you something."

"What's that?" Rafe asked.

Mike looked left and right. "I'm not from this world. I'm from another one."

The fox frowned. "That's, well, that's not unheard of. Which, erm, world? Oh. You're a true Fae. That's got to be it."

"Not exactly," Mike pasted a smile on his face. "I'm human."

Rafe paled. "Come on." He punched Mike in the shoulder. "You shouldn't joke like that."

"It's true," Mike insisted.

Rafe's mouth worked for a moment. "In...in that case, we need to get you out of here. Now. In fact, we need to get you home."

"Why? I thought you wanted me to join your band of heroes."

Rafe grinned, but it was too wide and the muscles at the corners strained. "Oh, no big reason. Other than this: you're in great danger."

“Yeah. I noticed. Witches, remember?” Mike shook his head. “No, no, no. All my life, I’ve wanted to have my own Narnia-style adventure. I’ve wanted to be pretty much anywhere but home. I’m not going back.”

“Then why’d you tell me?”

“I thought you’d like to know.”

Rafe took a deep breath. “Fine. That’s fine. But you’ve still got to leave. If you don’t, you’ll be in a lot of trouble.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Risk what?” A new voice came from the tent-flap. A man entered, or at least something like a man. His body was made from living shadow and his face was blank except for twin points of light where the eyes should be. A cloak hid the rest of his form from sight.

Rafe scrambled to his feet. “Inquisitor Selby. I didn’t think you until later.”

“There are heretic witches about. Of course I came quickly,” the shadowman said, “And I hear this one knows something about them.”

“Not really,” Mike said, “I’m not exactly on their Christmas card list.”

“Yet you were their prisoner, so the story goes, and yet they bothered to heal you. Witches do not heal prisoners.”

“What can I say?” Mike said with a shrug, “I guess my winning personality appealed to them.”

The shadow-man frowned. “And what is that supposed to mean? Nevermind. You’re an interesting case yourself. No one here knows you. There is no record of

someone matching your description living in these lands. And then there is this.” He held up Mike’s violin. “Explain, if you will, the purpose of this.”

“A musical instrument,” Mike said, “I play it to entertain people.”

The Inquisitor frowned and plucked the string experimentally. “I see,” he said, “However true, or otherwise, that statement might be, it does not answer the real question at hand, now does it?”

Mike furrowed his brow. “I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“No, I think I’ve found you.”

“It’s an expression. Oh nevermind.” Mike didn’t have a desire to get into the intricacies of metaphors and expressions right now.

“The real question,” Selby pressed on regardless, “is where you came from, isn’t it?”

“Inquisitor Selby,” Rafe protested.

“Good Prince, it is best if you do not interfere while I am working.”

“Working?” Rafe repeated in alarm, “But why? He’s not under investigation, is he?”

A glowing smile spread across the shadow-man’s face. “Yes. Yes I’m afraid he is. This...human is an enemy of the kingdom.” He held out a hand. The shadows twisted and contorted into the form of a sword. “One I intend to eliminate.”

“Human?” Mike said with a chuckle, “Now where did you get a ridiculous idea like that?”

“Please, you didn’t think an Inquisitor couldn’t recognize a human,” Selby said with a chuckle, “Now summon up your dread magic. Prepare yourself for battle. For I, the King’s Servant, will strike you down.”

Mike crossed his arms. “No.”

Selby faltered. “No?”

“No. I won’t fight you. That would be suicide.”

“I see,” Selby said with distaste. “Human, if you have no power, then it will be even easier to kill you,” Selby said with triumph in his voice, “Now, by order of the King of Avalon...” He raised his sword. “Die, human.”

“No!” Wreathed in a miniature tornado of flame, Rafe leapt in between them. The shadows withered and died before him. Selby recoiled in pain and shielded his eyes from the brightness of the fire.

“Selby stop, I command it.” Rafe lowered his paws and the flames died down. “Stop before you do something rash which we will all regret. Mike, are you alright?”

Mike stood stock-still, eyes wide and staring at where the flame had struck the lance. “That was... That was...” He took a deep breath. “Awesome!” Stars shone in his eyes and a manic grin split his face in half. He leapt over Selby and almost tackled Rafe. “Can you do it again? What else can you do? I’ve never seen anyone do something so cool. You’re amazing.”

“Rafe, my prince,” Selby hissed. The blade reformed in his hands. “Out of the way, or I will remove you.”

Rafe laughed. “You can’t kill me. My father would have your head.”

“I don’t need to kill you to remove you from my way.”

Mike looked for an exit. Sure, pyrotechnics were cool and all, but living was much more important. There was no easy way out. Time to use his head. He raised his hand. Selby and Rafe stepped back in alarm and braced themselves. He slowly lowered his arm. “Sorry, that’s what we do when we want to say something and other people are talking.” He tried his best to look innocent. “Um, but hey, instead of killing me, how about arresting me instead?”

Rafe seized on that idea. “Yes. That seems much more reasonable.” He nudged Selby. “Besides, won’t my father the king want to talk to the first human to have come here in over a hundred years? You can’t kill him. In fact, I order you to arrest Mike and place him in protective custody.”

Selby took a deep breath and his shadow swords vanished into the air. He bowed. “That would be acceptable, I suppose. As you wish, my Prince.” He glowered and seized Mike. “Come along, human scum. You won’t like this, I assure you.”

“Better than the alternative,” Mike muttered.

“Indeed,” Selby growled.

* * *

It was early morning, before sunrise, when Mike woke from sleep. His ‘room’ was a storage closet, locked and guarded from the outside. A simple cot and a chamber-pot which remained empty no matter how many times he used it were the only additions that made it a place for sleeping. The guards had removed everything else. They’d left

him a bare room with nothing to escape with. Thus, he was very surprised to see movement by the side of his bed.

A firm hand slammed across his mouth before he'd even begun to inhale. "Shh," Rafe hissed, "Don't shout."

He pushed the hand away. "Rafe?"

He sighed. "Yes Mike. It's me. Now please, don't make another sound and don't make me rethink breaking all the laws my father set down, alright? Because it would not take too much to talk me out of this."

"What is...?" Mike clamped his mouth shut.

"Good man. 'This' is a prison break." He smiled wolfishly. "I have your things loaded up already and Mrs. Willow is distracting the guards. Come on, get out of bed."

Mike frowned. "Are you sure? I mean, I am in jail. Have I been released?"

"No."

"Then is this probation?"

"I don't know what that is, but now. This is a jail-break."

Mike laughed. "I see." Hey, misunderstood heroes broke out of jail all the time. This would be no different. His smile faded. This place was very dangerous. Maybe he'd be better off explaining things to the king and getting some formal training before he ran off. "Come to think of it though, I'm not in danger. Everyone's been nice and considerate. Except Selby. It's almost like being put up at a friend's house when they don't have a guest bedroom." He swallowed. "As long as Selby stays away."

"Oh, you're in danger," Rafe said, "The instant your humanity was discovered, you were in danger. The king has no mercy for your kind."

“But I didn’t do anything.” Mike was frustrated. He wanted to be the hero, not a prisoner and certainly not dead.

“It doesn’t matter. Are you coming or not?”

Mike’s mouth clicked shut. He scrambled to his feet and moved towards the door. Rafe grabbed him and hauled him back. “Wait,” he ordered. He muttered something under his breath and a shimmer appeared in the air around them. “Alright, here’s how this is going to work. I can make one person invisible to one other person. So, I will walk out and you will follow right behind me.”

Stay right behind the fox. Mike could do that. Rafe nudged the door open and stepped confidently into the hall. Mike trotted along behind.

“I can hear your footsteps,” Rafe hissed.

“Sorry.”

“And what did I say about talking?”

“Sor--” Mike shut himself up. Carefully, one foot in front of the other, he crept forward. The interior of the barn was lightly guarded. They passed the first soldier without incident. He saluted Rafe and continued patrolling. Mike let out a sigh of relief. But laughter echoed from up ahead and light slipped in from under the door. “Guards ahead,” he whispered.

“I know.” Rafe didn’t turn. “Stay behind me. Stick to the shadows, We’ll walk by.”

The prince stepped out the door. Mike slipped along behind him. The rest of the guards sat around a circle of firelight, watching the three kids perform. They kicked their legs high and weaved around each other. Some sort of dance. Mrs. Willow tapped out a

rhythm on a drum. She glanced towards Mike and nodded. He mouthed 'thank you' back to her. Whether or not she understood, he never knew.

A wagon sat idling with a horse attached. Rafe opened the back door and gestured for Mike to enter. He did and Rafe clambered in behind him. He dispelled the illusion and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Supply wagon," Rafe said when the door was shut, "Long as we're quiet, they'll never know we're gone until it's too late."

Mike slumped down. "You know, I always wanted to go on an adventure. But, well, even that was pretty exciting."

"You take what you can get," Rafe said, "Now. Here's the deal. I will help you..."

"Thank you!" Mike shook his paw. "I'm glad we could see eye to eye. I promise you, I will help in any way I..."

"I'll help you if," Rafe said, "If and only if you agree that you will leave."

Mike's enthusiasm faded. "Oh."

"And never return."

"That's kind of a downer."

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it. But if you leave it, I'll run right back to Inquisitor Selby and tell him where you're," Rafe said, "I think you're a good person, I still do, but it would go against my duty to the kingdom if I let you roam free."

"I guess this would be a good time to mention I have a sister," Mike said, "And she's likely wandering around this world same as me."

Rafe took a deep breath. "Let me guess, you have no idea where she is."

"Not a single one."

Rafe leaned back and was silent for a long moment. “New plan then. Find her and then you both leave. My father has a book called the Book of Records. He only checks it once a week, so we have a few days before he finds out two humans are in his realm. We’re going to sneak in, find out where she is, and send you both packing.”

Mike shrugged. What option did he have? Seems Rafe was calling the shots. That’d change later. He’d have to prove himself. Until then, this deal was the best he was going to get. Might as well accept. “Well, it all makes a horrible sort of sense.” He sighed. “Alright. To the Book of Records then?”

Rafe nodded. “To the Book of Records then.” He patted the carriage. “This will take us where we want to go. There’s a tunnel that runs underground to the Royal City. From there, our adventure really begins.”

ACT TWO

Of Magic Books and Swords

“Here’s the place,” the Voice said, “Go ahead. Knock.”

Amanda sighed. “If you insist, oh wise and glorious leader.” She glanced sideways toward the alley. Her two guardians watched from the shadows. Good. If she got in trouble, they’d come running. She rapped her knuckles sharply against the wood door. There was no reply. Annoyed, she tried again.

“We’re closed,” someone snapped from inside. Amanda didn’t care. She knocked a third time. “Are you deaf?”

“Are you?” she shouted back, “Open the door.”

After a moment, something lumbered over to the door and opened it a crack. An eye glared down at her. “What?”

Amanda smiled. “I’m here to see Mr., er.” She glanced up at the sign above her. She couldn’t read it. The letters were in some flowery script overflowing with flourishes and extra lines. How was she supposed to read that?

“Mimov Alchemical Emporium,” the Voice said, “The owner is Mr. Mimov. This is the last time I’m reminding you.”

“Mr. Mimov,” Amanda said, “I’m here to see him. Yes.” She felt like a character on a corny comedy show, one of the ones where the guy has his friend whisper him advice on how to woo a girl. Except she couldn’t take out her earpiece.

The door opened a bit wider and she got a better look at who answered the door. The person, a human-sized, morbidly obese bat, scrutinized Amanda. “We’re closed.”

Amanda nodded. "Sure, sure. So can I come in?"

The obese bat considered it. "No." She moved to close the door.

"Stop her," the Voice ordered. Flustered, Amanda did the only thing she could think to do. She stuck her foot in the door. It hurt.

"What are you doing?" the bat-lady snapped.

Amanda gulped.

"Don't stand there looking stupid," the Voice shouted. Amanda winced. "Say something."

Remember all those old gangster movies, Amanda. Think, what would Al Capone do? Break someone's legs, that's what. She met the bat's fiery eyes with a cold, even stare. "I'm here to see Mr. Mimov," she repeated and tapped the handle of her bat with a grin.

The bat-lady rolled her eyes and opened the door again. "You looking to buy or you owe him money?"

"Neither," Amanda answered. Stay in character now. She made to push her way in, but the woman held the door fast. "He'll want to talk to me."

The bat stuck her head out and curled her upper lip. "And why," she said, "Is that?"

Amanda steeled her nerves. Here goes nothing She leaned in and spoke in a low, menacing voice. "Because I have something very private that he will want to hear. And if he doesn't hear it, there will be very personal consequences for him."

That caught the bat's attention. A grin stretched her over-sized mouth to slasher proportions. "I knew it. I knew this would happen one day." She danced a little jig. "Ah,

the old wither-wings finally slipped up and you caught him. Now you're going to squeeze him for all he's worth, right? Every last drop?"

Amanda puzzled over the woman's words. "You're talking about blackmail, right?"

"Blackmail. Such an interesting term. I suppose this would be the blackest mail he's ever received." She threw the door open for Amanda and bowed. "Please, clever spy, come in. Come in and reap the rewards of your toils."

Amanda stepped across the threshold and into a rainbow. Torches lit by silent, unmoving flame sent light through a myriad of glass bottles, each filled with brightly colored liquids. she didn't have time to examine them, but she did manage to read a few of their labels. "Cure-All: For all your curing needs!" "Dead-Lift: Carry an anvil, if you want." and so on.

"I'm proud of you," the Voice said, "You know, for a while there, I doubted you had any real fire in you. Sure, you blustered and put on a tough front before the Inquisitors, but anyone could have done that. But now I see, there is some real quality underneath."

"Thanks," Amanda whispered, though she wasn't very thankful.

Amanda's guide led her through the maze, past two other bat-creatures, and to a door that read 'Mr. Malik Mimov, Owner and Operator' stood waiting. With a cackle, the bat knocked, a sharp, merciless sound.

"Mr. Mimov," she said sweetly, "There is someone here to see you." A muffled response came from within. "He says to go right in." The woman grinned at Amanda. "Do tell me how it goes."

“Sure thing,” Amanda said in a voice that undermined her words. She shook aside her hesitations and pushed the door out of her way.

Another bat, like the three outside, sat behind a huge desk piled with flasks, vials, and a little burner, engrossed in watching a red liquid drip out of a tube and into a pan. He licked his lips with a long, thin, dry tongue.

“That’s him,” the Voice said, “A dear, old friend of mine.” It laughed.

“We’re closed,” Mimov whispered in a voice weak as paper. He was more like a corpse than something alive. The door closed behind her with a faint click, the sort of sound that sealed the door to a tomb.

“I don’t care,” Amanda said with false sweetness, “I’m not here to buy.”

Mimov grunted. “You’ll wait then. This is a very delicate experiment, yes, yes. Requires my utmost attention.”

“I don’t have the time.”

“Wait.” Something in his voice, in the way his eyes flared, brought Amanda up short. “If you won’t wait, then leave.”

“Look who grew a backbone in his old age” the Voice cackled. Amanda sat on a bench. “Please tell me you’re not actually listening to him.” Amanda didn’t answer.

“Well fine. If that’s what you want to do, waste time. And here I thought ‘every second counted’ for saving poor Mike.”

Amanda clenched her fists. She rose from her seat and fingered her bat. “Hey,” she said. Mimov ignored her. “Hey!”

Mimov glanced up with a weary sigh. “Yes?”

“Ask me what I want.”

“I don’t have time to play games, child.”

“Neither do we,” the Voice added.

“Fine.” Amanda shoved aside Mimov notes and plopped down on the table. The bat’s face turned red. “What I want is your help.” He moved to shove her off, but she brandished her baseball bat with a smile. “And I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Don’t let up on him.”

“I see.” Mimov studied her and squinted. “I’m sorry, we do not give potions to those who can’t pay for them. And certainly not to thugs.”

“I’m not here for a potion,” Amanda said.

The alchemist stiffened and the Voice cackled. “He knows what’s coming.”

“Then what,” Mimov hissed, “Is it that you want?”

“Say it,” the Voice instructed, “Like I told you.”

“The Advent of the White Fox is at hand or something like that.” She pointed the bat right into his face. “And you’d better pay up, batty, or else I’m going to get rather smashy with my little friend here. Then, I’ll go right to the guards and tell them everything you did four years ago. Capiche?”

The man didn’t move an inch. “Ah.” There was a long pause. “I see.” Another pause. “Very interesting.” He leaned forward, crouched low over his desk. A flask of green fell to the floor and shattered with the sound of screams, but he paid it no mind. “So, who are you then?”

“Tell him,” the Voice instructed.

She squared her shoulders and jaw, crossed her arms, and tried to look impressive. “I’m Amanda Watters and I’m a human.”

“Human?” Mimov scrambled away as if she were acid. “Oh no, no, no. Will I ever be free of this blasted cult? I told them I wanted nothing to do with it. I’ve reformed.” He collected himself and pointed a shaky finger at her. “You have to leave, human. I...I can’t help you. I’ve come too far. I won’t be dragged back into this.”

Amanda hesitated. In truth, she wasn’t a mean person. Hot-headed and temperamental, yes, but this was cruel: beyond anything she’d done before.

“Remember Mike,” the Voice whispered, “You wouldn’t want him to die because his sister was too weak to do what needed to be done.”

Amanda hefted her bat. “That’s great. And you know, I’d love to tell you how sorry I am for ‘dragging you back into this’. If I had more time, I could pat you on the back, give you my sympathies, and we could all move forward with good feelings and happy thoughts.” She brought the bat down on his desk and scattered several bottles of unidentified liquids. Mimov yelped as if in pain. “But I don’t have time. I’ve wasted enough of it already. You’re going to get off your crying, sniveling butt and do exactly as I say.”

The alchemist’s eyes searched her and he considered his options. But he was beat and he knew it. “As if I have a choice. Even if you don’t kill me, they will for daring to defy you,” Mimov said with a trembling voice, “What do you want?”

“I want a ship,” Amanda said, “I need to get to King’s Island.”

“King’s Island. No, you don’t want to go there.” He grasped her hand and fell to his knees.

“I have to,” Amanda said, unmoved.

“You don’t understand.” He chuckled. “If you go there, you’ll be in great danger.”

Amanda gripped her bat tighter. “My brother already is. And this is the only way I know that can get him out of it.” For a moment, they stared at each other. Then, she stuck out her hand. “So, do we have a deal? You get me a ship, I leave. No questions asked, we never see each other again.”

Mimov hesitated, then accepted her hand. “I’ll...gather a chest of gold for you to take. And I think I know a ship that’ll take you, no questions asked.”

Amanda smiled a tight, businesslike smile. “Excellent. I’ll wait out in the store while you gather what I need.” She stepped outside and came face to face with the lady who’d let her in. Her ear had been pressed to the door. Had she heard about Amanda’s humanity?

“Millian,” Mimov shrieked, “Get in here. I need a chest and all the gold.”

The female bat grinned and winked at Amanda. “Right away, sir.” She brushed by Amanda and whispered. “Good job, you’ve got him licked. Be sure to keep him.”

Amanda wasn’t sorry to leave the place.

* * *

Amanda looked the *Venture* up and down. For the first time, she really looked at it. Twice now, she’d been aboard. It was high time she bothered to glance it over. Sleek curves ran up and down its hull, which hovered a good five feet above the water. The ship was made from some sort of brown substance, neither wood nor metal. Add a mast

and sails, and this thing would be the spitting image of an old sailing ship. She shrugged.

“...It looks fine I suppose.”

“A good ship,” the Voice agreed, “They’ve come a long way in a few years. I doubt even a Void-storm would sink this one.”

“Right.” Amanda rolled her eyes. “Voidstorms. Whatever those are.”

“Think of them like a hurricane. But the rain will melt the flesh from your bones if you stay out in it too long.”

Amanda shuddered. “Well, let’s hope we don’t run into one of those.” She began walking towards the gangplank, wheeling the chest of gold behind her. The cultists followed her once again, hidden in the shadows, like her very own secret-service agents.

Three men sat beside it, playing some game. They glanced up at her. “Back again. Well go back where you came from. The captain already sent you away.” the first snapped.

“The captain is my concern. Not yours.” She pressed forward and almost made it to the gangplank. The three sailors scrambled to their feet and blocked her. Amanda sighed. “I’m here to buy passage, idiots,” she said.

The first sailor pushed her back. “Out. Shoo. Get a move on. We don’t want you here.”

“I think I can change your mind.” Amanda pushed the chest forward and began unlocking it. The three’s suspicious glances turned to astonishment when they saw the gold inside.

“Well, well, well.” They were all grins and smiles now. Amanda smirked. It was amazing how money changed minds. “Maybe you’d better see the captain. How about you let us carry that heavy chest for you?”

“They’ll take it for themselves,” the Voice warned.

Amanda had her bat out and ready within moments. “No thanks,” she said with a smile, “I’ve got it.”

The sailors shrugged. Together, they could take her, but it wasn’t worth the trouble. “Suit yourself.”

Amanda boarded the ship. It looked much the same from here as it did from the dock, though the absence of a mast and ropes made the deck feel open. Hardly anyone was on deck. If this crew was anything like a human one, they were probably all enjoying the land while they could. “Captain,” her escorts called, “We got someone here you’ll want to speak to.”

Captain Gale kicked the door to her cabin open, already in fine temper. When she spotted Amanda, her face turned a horrible shade of red and she hissed. “You bloody idiots,” she shouted, “I told you, no one gets on the ship but the crew.”

“Yes, cap’n.”

“So, are you three deaf or stupid?” She shook her sword at them. “Get her off my ship.”

“Captain, you might want to hear her out.”

The captain rolled her yellow eyes. “Fine.” She crossed her arms and glared at Amanda. “Alright, little lady, what’s so important that my crew would disobey my orders to bring you to me?”

At the Voice's command, Amanda opened the chest of gold. It was all the answer the captain needed.

She grinned with a greedy light in her eyes. "Oh-ho. And what, do tell, do you want us to do?"

"I need you to take me to King's Island," Amanda answered, "And I need you to do it now."

Far above, a seagull cried out. Wind blew across the deck. The sounds of the wharf filled the air. But neither Gale nor her crew moved. Then, the captain laughed. "Now I remember. King's Island, hmm? The place that only the Royal Family can visit? The place always surrounded by storms and whirlpools? The place guarded by the fiercest monsters to ever roam the Void Sea?"

"She is exaggerating," the Voice whispered, "Trying to make the endeavor seem more dangerous. Our gold will be more than enough."

Captain Gale leaned in with a toothy grin. "I guess that's why you came to the best ship on the ocean, hmm?" She threw her head back and laughed. An arm snaked around Amanda's shoulder and her forked tongue shot out mere millimeters from Amanda's ear. "But tell me, what's to stop me from taking this chest of yours and dumping you overboard?"

The other three sailors crowded around her, drawing weapons and cackling. Amanda's grip tightened on her bat.

"Well this is a problem," the Voice said, "She's greedier than I expected." Amanda's arms tensed for a blow. "Don't bother. They'll overwhelm you and make good on their threats. Offer them more."

“What?” she hissed.

“Offer them more money.”

Amanda shook her head. Captain Gale waited, satisfied with the situation and waiting for her answer. “Alright then. Look, captain, you can take this chest right now, but...”

The captain grinned in a decidedly unfriendly manner. “Yes?”

“You won’t get the other half of the payment.” Amanda grinned back. “Mr. Mimov has an even larger chest waiting for you when I am delivered back here safely.”

The captain thought about it for a moment. The light of greed shone in her eyes. With a cavalier motion, she sheathed her sword and swept off her hat. “Welcome aboard the *Venture*. We hope you enjoy your second, longer, more profitable visit.”

Amanda relaxed. “Good. How soon can we leave?”

The captain scoffed. “For this price? Give me an hour to gather the crew. Shouldn’t be too hard to root them out of their bars.” She snapped her fingers at the three sailors. “You, find Sharky and his lot. Then, spread out and gather the rest.”

“Aye, Captain.” The scurried off into town.

“And what should I do in the meantime?” Amanda asked.

The captain chuckled and patted her on the head. “Why, go for a nice, relaxing walk. It’s three days to King’s Island and you won’t have much room onboard.” She scowled. “And if you get seasick, that’s not our problem, understand? This is a merchant’s vessel, not a pleasure cruiser. You deal with your own problems.”

“Understood.” Amanda leaned against the rail. “I’ll wait here then.” The captain shrugged and walked up to the helm. Privately, Amanda smiled. “This is going well.”

“Much better than what you had in mind,” the Voice agreed.

“Yep.” Amanda laughed. “I suppose you’re not so bad to have around after all.”

* * *

“Stop making this difficult,” Rafe snapped.

“I’m not making it difficult,” Mike protested, “You’re not making any sense.”

A day had passed since their escape. Rafe had ushered him from the back of the wagon deep underground. At first, Mike thought they were going to see dwarves running about a mine and hauling gold up to the surface for use in all manner of magical and wondrous artifacts. Instead, they had found dwarves, but these ones operated a train. A train that floated in the middle of a long, straight tunnel that led right to the capitol of Avalon. Now, Mike and Raph glared at each other from opposite sides of their compartment, tempers hot and frustration mounting.

Rafe took a deep breath. “Maybe we should set this aside from now.”

Mike squared his jaw. “No. I want to learn.”

“But you’re not understanding it,” Rafe said, “This is pointless.”

“You said, and I quote, “Everyone in Avalon can wield magic”. Well I’m here. I’m in Avalon. And while I’m here, I want to learn magic, dang it.” Mike spoke a bit hotter than he intended. But really, who could blame him? Magic was a key part of these sorts of adventures. He was not about to miss his one chance to learn it for himself.

Rafe’s jaw tightened. “One more time, then,” he said. He tired of this exercise. “Simply. So you can understand.” He grabbed Mike’s head between his paws and stared

into his eyes. “Magic,” he said, “is the product of the will. You impose your will on the world and make it real. However, the Feyfolken, my people, have innate connections with certain forms of magic. Forms which come more easily to us. For me.” Flames sprouted from Rafe’s tail. “It’s fire.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad told us this in bedtime stories. But I spent hours trying to will something, anything, to happen. Nothing did.”

“That’s because you had no magical connection,” Rafe snapped.

“Great. I’m out of luck then. No magic for me.”

“No.” Rafe snarled and tugged at his ears in frustration. “Avalon. It’s magic. Everything here is connected to magic. Now that you’ve been here, you’re connected to magic too.”

Mike brightened. “Then I summon a nice root-beer float.” He waved his hands in the air. Nothing happened. “I’m doing something wrong.”

“Yes,” Rafe agreed.

“Teach me.”

Rafe eyed Mike warily. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“Come on. This isn’t about me being human, right?” Mike grabbed Rafe’s paw. “Rafe, this is the only chance I’ll ever have to do something like this. I’ve always dreamed of casting spells and throwing around fireballs. I’m not going to destroy Avalon. I want to be a hero, remember? And you do too. Help me, Rafe.”

Rafe swallowed. “Alright then. The, uh, problem you’re facing is one everyone meets when first learning. See, It’s not wanting something to happen, it’s willing it. The

greater willpower you've got, the more powerful you are. If you falter, your magic will fail."

"Got it. if I believe it will work, it will."

"No." Rafe glowered. "It's not belief. That's confidence. It's will." He fell back against his seat. "It helps if you can clear your mind of distractions and focus solely on what you want to happen."

Mike nodded and reached for his violin. It had always helped him concentrate. He'd had some of his best ideas while practicing. He removed it and began tuning up the strings.

"What are you doing?" Rafe asked.

"Focusing," Mike replied.

"Humans are weird," Rafe muttered.

"Says the talking fox."

Mike played a mellow tune, one that relaxed him and didn't require much effort. He blocked out the sounds of the wind rushing by, the sight of the walls blurred by speed, and even Rafe watching him with a curious expression. Empty. Calm. Focused. That's what he wanted to be.

He envisioned a note. A single note of music, suspended and separate from everything else. He held it there, studied it, and focused solely on it. Then, he thrust it forward, not quite knowing what he was doing but wishing for something, anything to happen. Before his mind's eye, it turned into a flash of light. Rafe yelped.

"You did it," the prince shouted, "That's enough. Mike, stop!"

Mike stopped and opened his eyes. “I knew I could do it.” His eyes widened. Rafe was curled up in front of him, arms shielding his face, with a glowing barrier between them. Scorch marks covered the wall behind him. He peeked out and lowered the shield. Mike grinned sheepishly. “Heh, heh. Sorry?”

Rafe stared at the marks right behind him. “Never. Do that. Again.”

“I don’t even know what I did.”

“You were playing that instrument,” Rafe said, “And then, spurts of magic start flying everywhere. No finesse, no form. Random, uncontrolled, raw magic zipping out every time you played a note.”

“Cool,” Mike said.

Rafe ground his teeth. “No. Not cool. Hot. Burning hot.” Rafe sighed. “Alright. So we know you can do magic now. We need to work on control. Because if you don’t, you’ll...”

An alarm interrupted him. The train lurched.. It slowed, braking as fast as it could. “Great.” Rafe put his head in his paws. “Great. Perfect. Fantastic. I should go check that out.”

Mike stuck his head out the window. There, approaching at ludicrous speeds, was the largest, thickest spider-web he’d ever seen. He ducked back in as it whizzed past and barely avoided getting it full in the face. “Rafe? How big of spiders do you get around here?”

Rafe paled. “Oh no.” He jumped to his feet and ran for the front of the train. “Driders,” he called, “We’ve got driders.”

The other passengers took up the cry. “Driders on the walls! Prepare to be boarded!”

Now, instead of braking, the train sped up. With a horrible screech, the train scraped through another web. However, tendrils clung to it and dragged against the walls, ripping up loose stones and catching on any solid ledge. The floor tilted and Mike slammed against the wall, but the train righted itself and kept on going. Mike panted. Well, there was no point in staying put. Besides, being alone wasn’t safe. Better to be with the fire-slinging fox. He grabbed his belongings and set off after Rafe.

The train struck something again and he stumbled forward. He flailed for a second, but managed to catch himself on the wall. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing turbulence,” he muttered, “If you must walk, for the love of God, please hold on tight to something.”

The front of the train was in chaos. Rafe ran around, shouting orders and demanding to know what was going on. The captain also ran around doing much the same thing. The crew and a few of the passengers tried their best to avoid answering them while either grabbing weapons and preparing ‘to repel boarders’ or waving their arms around in a general panic.

Mike took it all in. This was going nowhere. These people clearly needed organization. After all, you couldn’t repel boarders with a mob. Well, they could, they’d lose more. Hey, they might be better swordsmen and mages, but he was the hero here, darn it. He’d have to settle for organizing the army rather than leading it. “Hey,” he shouted, “Listen up. I have an idea.” He realized with annoyance that they were ignoring him. “Hey!”

They continued ignoring him. Mike bit his lip. What had he been thinking? He couldn't help these people. He couldn't swing a sword or cast a spell. The best he could do was stay out of the way. If he got behind them, he'd be protected by Rafe's magic and whatever nonsense the dwarves who ran this train could come up with.

With a final screech, and lurch the train ground to a halt. The crowd fell silent, as if someone had flipped a switch, and stared up at the ceiling. Mike glared at them. Oh now they were quiet. Too late for him to contribute anything, but better late than never.

A soft titter and the sound of rustling limbs echoed down the tunnel followed by a hiss. The defenders huddled together in the middle, forming a ring around Rafe and those who wouldn't fight. Mike looked around. The laugh and hiss came again, closer this time. There was something large and heavy walking on the roof.

"Hello, pretties." Mike frowned. That was a beautiful, female voice, the kind you'd expect from a singer. "Come out, come out, wherever you're." That giggle came from right above the window this time. "The White Fox has such tender affections for you all. It would make his day if you were to come visit him. Come out, little ones. I promise I don't bite. Much."

A moan went through the other passengers. "The White Fox". "Not those cultists." "They're rebels, not cultists". The defenders were thrown into confusion and dismay. Mike wanted to shout out for them to focus and watch the windows, but when he felt the words forming in his throat, those windows shattered.

Long, black, chitinous legs forced themselves inside. They ripped apart the side of the train and cleared the way for a giant, bloated abdomen. But where the head of a spider would be, the torso of a woman sat instead. Her face was beautiful and her body beautiful

in every way except for the waist where her skin melded with dark-green shell. Mike let out a startled squeak and hid behind a chair. Great, now he was trapped on the other side of the car from Rafe. But she hadn't noticed him yet. Small blessings, Mike, small blessings.

She smiled and spread her arms wide as if to embrace the defenders. "Come now. It's rude to talk like that about someone who can hear you," she crooned, "Especially a woman." She snarled and bared fangs.

Rafe stepped to the front, wreathed in fire. "Evil creature," he said, "You've made a terrible mistake. Leave, or I will destroy you." The passengers and crew cheered.

"The prince," the half-woman hissed, "My, my, this is my lucky day, isn't it?" A shudder run through her. Her legs tapped the ground eagerly. "A fine prize to present to the White Fox when he returns."

"Your leader will never return," Rafe declared, "And as for you..." Flame shot from his fingers and the battle was joined.

"Attack," the conductor bellowed. A line of dwarves wielding pikes which crackled with electricity charged. Another group raised crossbows and fired lightning bolts which slammed into her and drove her toward the hole in the side. She let out a scream and Mike covered his ears. The floor shook from it.

"Rally," Rafe shouted, but the dwarves were stunned. They didn't recover in time before she leapt forward, scattering them left and right with flailing kicks and slashing them with venom-laced swords.

The scene devolved from a semi-organized defense to an all-out-brawl. A cat wielding two knives, one of the passengers no doubt, flew through the air and struck at

any chitinous joint he could find. The dwarves tried to grab her legs. Rafe pelted her face with fire, which seemed to do her no injury but did blind her. Yet despite their efforts, she whirled like a desert dervish, a tornado of kicking legs, venomous spittle, and screams that froze the very blood of her enemies.

Mike scrambled out from under the chair and backed away. A full-on battle. It would be cool if his life didn't hang in the balance. He could leave. Slide down the web and walk back the way the train had come. He shook his head. "Get it together, Mike," he said to himself, "That's stupid. You'd die of thirst and dehydration, not to mention whatever other horrible monsters live down here." No, he had to make sure Rafe's side won.

But how? Sure, he could throw himself into that melee. Perhaps he could even do that 'random bolts of magic' thing he'd done back in their compartment. But, he was no good in a brawl and that magic attack was as likely to hit his allies as it was his enemies.

What, then? He was still the hero, right? That's how this deal worked. There had to be something he could do that could help. Wait, the webs. He ran to the torn-open side of the train and leaned out. Webbing held it in place and more dark shapes lurked at the edges of the dim light. They were drawing closer. One of these things was enough. An army of them. He swallowed. He needed to get the train moving again.

A fallen "sword" lay next to him. Well, more of a long, sharp piece of metal. But today it was a sword. His hand shook, but he picked it up anyway. It wasn't hard to climb up to the roof, so long as he didn't look down. Here, the shadows seemed closer and the webbing thicker, like repulsive, sticky harp-strings. He swung. With a sharp 'twang', the first strand sprung back and retreated into the shadows.

Mike pumped a fist in triumph. Hey, this wasn't so hard. This he could do. But then, he looked down the tracks and groaned. Dozens of strands, more than he could cut, held the train in place. He'd never get to them all in time. Those spiders were getting closer.

He glanced back at his violin case. Perhaps, if he couldn't go one at a time, he could go for them all at once. With a surge of hope, he slung off his case and again drew out the violin. The music seemed wrong, out of place and out of sync with the sounds of battle from below, but Mike blocked that out. He forced himself to think only of the notes. Hold them. Do not let anything push them aside. Now, ignite!

Sparks flickered across his strings. He grinned and played faster. More. He needed more. He forced them out, bent his mind to making them stronger, brighter, fiercer, and send them leaping from the strings to the webs.

A beam of light shot out and turned one strand to ash. Mike played harder. Another lanced out and ignited another web. Then another and another until the more light than air filled the space around him.

It made a strange sort of music, his violin and the snapping webs. The train lurched forward a foot. Hope surged in his chest. He played faster, forcing his hands to move with the speed of lightning no matter how much they complained. The dark shadows drew closer, but he pushed them out of his mind lest they paralyze him with fear.

Then, with a final note and a snap, the train shot forward and pulled free of the remaining strands. It shot forward into the clear, unobstructed portion of the tunnel.

Mike laughed and shook his fist at the shadows that lurked behind. They let out a shriek of rage, only able to watch their prey escaped their grasp. “Take that,” he shouted back. He’d done it. Magic. Now, they had a chance. And it was all thanks to him. Yes, he could see it now. A big statue, a medal around his neck, and Rafe cheering from the stands.

A horrible rending sound came from behind him. His bravado evaporated in an instant. Right. She was still onboard. And apparently, she’d decided that she’d had enough fun with the main course and come for dessert. Him. He turned to face her with a nervous smile.

“Good morning, ma’am,” he said brightly, “How may I help you today? Manicure? I’d offer a pedicure, but I don’t think they come in ‘hairy-spider-legs’.”

She stood tall and glared down at him. Rafe was in her arms, dazed and wrapped in a cocoon of webbing. “Oh, you’re a clever one, aren’t you?” she hissed, “Cutting my webs, freeing this horrid machine. But you don’t care. You’re one of them, the invaders of my realm. Who are you, boy? Speak, and I may only tear off your arms.”

Mike gulped. “Please don’t. I’m rather attached to them myself.” Her eyes narrowed and she hissed. “Alright then. Not a fan of puns. I get that.”

Mike began looking for an escape route. There were none. But, up ahead, and rapidly approaching, the tunnel narrowed sharply. An idea, a feverish, foolish idea formed in his brain, the kind that only the very desperate can concoct.

He drew himself up. “I am Michael Steven Watters, a human. If you want to fight me, you’ll need your arms to do it. Put the nice fox down and face me.” He brandished the shard of metal, still sticky from cutting the webbing, and put on his bravest face.

Slowly, the woman set Rafe down behind her. She hissed. “Very well then. I will defeat you and make a double offering to the White Fox. For I...” Mike threw himself flat against the top of the train. She never noticed the stone wall that snuffed out her life and knocked her over Mike’s head and off the back into the abyss. There was a simple, wet ‘crunch’ and nothing more.

Mike lay still for what felt like a long time until the tunnel widened again. He rose, shaking, and ran to Rafe’s side. The fox prince struggled in his bonds. “Hang on, I’ve got you.” Mike snipped the strands with the tip of his sword and pulled Rafe free.

“You did it.” Rafe’s grin was the widest yet. “I mean, I had my doubts, but you did it. You’re a hero for real now, Mike.”

Mike felt weak. Now that the excitement was done, he trembled all over. “Yeah...whoo-hoo.” He turned away. “I’ve...got to find who this sword belongs to and return it.”

Rafe laid a paw on his shoulder. “That was a compliment, Mike. Or it was supposed to be.” Mike staggered and fell, the world swimming out of focus. Rafe let out a concerned yelp and caught him. “Mike, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“Hey Rafe,” Mike said, “I think I understand what you meant. I mean, about overexerting yourself when using magic. Can we go sit down now?”

Rafe nodded. “Yes, yes. That is a good idea. But please, don’t do that again. Not for a few days.” He cleared his throat. “Also, we should, you know, clear out of here as soon as we arrive. Royal privilege does get you very far, but it tends to leave a wide trail.”

* * *

Amanda was bound and determined not to get seasick. More than that, she was bound and determined to prove that she wasn't seasick. Unfortunately, no one, not even her own body believed her. After several attempts to rise, Captain Gale had confined her to her cabin, a ludicrously small space, with the cabin boy to 'keep her company'. Of course, this meant 'keep her from doing something stupid' or even 'keep me from having to look at her dumb face' and everyone knew it. She was sick of this place.

"You should stay put," the Voice admonished, "No sense in antagonizing the captain." Amanda didn't respond. "Ignoring me again. I thought we were past this." She glanced towards Rui. "Ah, don't want to look crazy to those who can't hear me. Fine. I'll talk, you listen."

"Your position is the best you could hope for right now. Of course, I didn't manage to sneak my followers aboard this ship, but the captain's loyalty is bought with coin. So long as she thinks protecting you will lead to a bigger payout, she will not let any harm come to you.

"However, annoy her and openly disrespect her authority aboard her own ship, and you will discover that even the most mercenary captain has limits. She won't throw you overboard, but she will throw you in the brig."

Amanda looked around and let her eyes rest on the very sparse room around her. "And no, this is not the brig. This is dry, at least. Do you understand me?" Amanda nodded. "You'll stay put, as the captain wishes?" A moment passed and then Amanda

nodded. “Good. Good. I am glad we could see eye to eye here. Besides, the upper deck of a ship can get very dangerous. It’s best you stay out of the way. I’d hate to lose you.”

“Lose me?” She glanced over the cabin boy. Rui, if she remembered correctly. He was the one who pulled her out of the ocean. He also was looking at her like she was crazy. Maybe she was. Who could say? But talking to herself wouldn’t help dispel that illusion. She smiled at him. “I’m losing my mind down here. Feeling cramped.”

“Sure. That makes sense.” He didn’t seem sure. “All that nodding and listening was nothing I should be worried about.”

“You got it.”

“Wow, I am glad we cleared that up. I feel much better now.”

He was mocking her. Amanda didn’t like being mocked. She pasted a smile on her face. “Good for you.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I mean, I’m only trapped down here with a strange person who magically falls in the ocean and then conjures up a chest full of gold. And, that’s after two Inquisitors were found unconscious in the sewers last night.” Rui shook his head. “But you had nothing to do with that, did you?”

“Of course not,” Amanda said, “There is absolutely nothing suspicious about me.”

They gave each other forced grins.

“Perceptive pup,” the Voice grumbled.

Rui shivered. Amanda stared evenly at him. He pulled his knees up to his chest. “Uh, wow. Is it getting cold in here, or is it me? Ha ha.” Amanda smirked. He gulped. “Hey, uh, forget what I said. Captain’s orders, we’re stuck down here together, no need to...” He trailed off. “Please don’t kill me.”

Amanda recoiled. "I'm not going to kill you, you moron!"

Hope appeared in Rui's eyes.

"Trust me. Killing is the farthest thing from my mind right now," Amanda said.

She sat up. "Maybe a trip to the deck would be help though."

"Amanda," the Voice chided.

Rui flinched. "I was told to keep you out of the way."

"Then keep me out of the way, do it on the deck. Sheesh, do you do everything they tell you to do?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much, yes."

Amanda glared at him. "Alright. Now I'm curious, but I don't want to have your entire sad life dumped on me. I don't need that."

A sly look crossed Rui's face. "If I told you..."

Amanda sighed. "Oh no."

"If I told you." Rui grinned. "You might listen to me."

"I might pity you," Amanda said, "There's a difference."

Rui's ears drooped, his whiskers fell, and his eyes watered. "Captain Gale says I'm not tough enough to be a sailor, so she runs me ragged. I wash the deck, I clean the latrine, I delouse the crew. I do every horrible, thankless job on this ship for a crust of bread and a few coppers." He sniffled. "But what can I do? I'm but a simple orphan. I don't have anywhere else to go. And if I don't obey her orders, it means more thankless, back-breaking, awful work." He sighed and flopped backwards. "So please, for the love of all that is holy, do not disobey her orders. Do not make my poor, miserable hapless life worse."

Amanda, true to her word, felt a twinge of pity. And another of annoyance. But mostly pity. “Well hey, far be it from me to make someone’s life harder.” The irony of that statement annoyed her. Uncle Travis would have some choice words on that subject, were he here. She shifted uncomfortably. “But...you shouldn’t let her run your life.”

Rui tilted his head. “Right. Ignore the one source of food and warm beds I’m likely to find.”

“No.” Amanda leaned forward. “But you can’t sit down and take it. You have to have courage. You have to stand up for what you think is right. You have to fight.”

Rui raised what passed for an eyebrow. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Amanda nodded. “Right then. You do that.”

A shout came from above decks. They couldn’t hear what it said, but they heard the bell that followed soon after. Rui stood up, eyes wide. “The alarm bell. We’re under attack.”

“Great.” Amanda put her head down on the pillow. “I’ll take a nap then.”

“Uh, no. All hands on deck.” Rui threw the door open. “Come on.”

“Nope. Hate to make your life harder. I’m staying right here.”

Rui glowered. “If the captain calls for all hands on deck, then something bad is happening. That means all hands are needed on deck. Now come on.”

Amanda threw up her hands. “Oh fine. If you insist, I will leave my luxurious accommodations and see what is happening above.”

“Thank. You.” Rui gestured to the doors. “Let’s go.”

Rui knelt down and helped her rise. She reached over and snagged her bat. She had a hunch she’d need it.

She didn't know what she expected to find when she stepped up onto the deck, but she knew it wasn't the entire crew all crowded against the side of the ship, staring into the sun.

"Mortimer," Captain Gale shouted down from the pilot-house, "What do you see?"

"It's goblins," replied a sailor with a spyglass held to his eye, "Definitely goblins. The Black-Winged Pirates, by their armor." The crew muttered in alarm.

"Goblins?" Amanda repeated.

"Nasty little creatures," the Voice explained, "Pirates, raiders, and bandits. Their entire society relies on stealing from others. However, they do make good mercenaries."

"Quiet. I said quiet," Gale snapped. Her eyes fell on Amanda. "You. Passenger. Get below deck and stay there."

"Hey, I'm fine right here," Amanda insisted, "I won't be any trouble."

"Uh-huh, sure." Gale searched for someone to hold responsible. "You there. Cabin boy. What's your name again?"

"Rui," he answered, miserable.

She leaned over the upper-deck railing. "Rui, there is a passenger on my deck. I want to know why."

"The alarm bell," he offered, "It's all hands on deck."

Captain Gale sighed. "I don't have time for this right now. Keep her alive. She's worth more than an entire hold worth of spices." She drew her sword. "All hands, prepare for battle!"

Soon, Amanda could spot the enemy ship. She and Rui sat near the front of the boat, staring back over the water. A sleek, black hull, the only one she'd seen with masts, flew above the waves and shot towards them at ludicrous speeds. The sea bubbled and boiled as it passed like a witch's cauldron. The crew crowded along the edge, weapons drawn and faces grim. Horns echoed across the water. Amanda squinted. Tiny green men with horribly wide, toothy maws scrambled about on the black ship like ants. There were at least a hundred. She sucked in a deep breath.

"Oh this is not good," she said, "Hey, uh, partner? Any advice?"

"Go back downstairs and hide," the Voice said, "Without Excalibur, you're no match for these things."

Amanda chuckled. "Right. Hide. Because that doesn't have 'bad idea' written in big, bold, flashing red letters all over it."

The black ship drew alongside. The goblins shook their weapons and jeered. Then, they took to the skies. Black wings unfolded from their backs and they jumped off the ship and glided over. Amanda frowned. Since when did goblins have wings? Correction, half of them had wings. The others climbed ropes hung from the masts and swung across. No sails. The 'masts' were just scaffolding to hold the ropes.

Captain Gale snarled. "Not a single one lives, boys." The crew roared and met the goblin's head-on.

The deck descended into chaos. Rui drew a cutlass from his side and held it at the ready. The crew fought fiercely, but there was no harm in being cautious. He grabbed Amanda's arm and pulled her back to the forecastle. "Let's stay over here."

“Listen to the mutt, Amanda,” the Voice said, “He knows what he’s talking about.”

She scrambled away. No guns, no explosions, but the deadly intent was the same as Dr. Merriweather’s. She balked at it, but she didn’t want to sit back and watch when she could be making sure her side won. She searched for a suitable target, one that wouldn’t put her in a even more danger.

A winged goblin perched upon the rear deck. Amanda’s eyes settled on him. He didn’t join the battle, but danced and cheered and shouted hoarse, brutal words. Gold and jewels covered his limbs, clattering around him.

“Rui,” she shouted, “I think I found their leader.”

Rui looked up and his eyes widened. “A goblin warchanter!” he cried in dismay, “Someone’s got to stop him.” He leaned over the railing and shouted to the crew fighting on the deck below. “Warchanter. There’s a warchanter.”

The crew ignored him, caught up in the struggle. The goblins dominated their attention. They moved with speed, dexterity, and ferocity, much more than Amanda would have thought they could.

“It’s no use,” Amanda said, “They don’t hear you.” She looked around for something to use. Well, there was a barrel of...something here. Some sort of leathery ball. She hefted her bat and grinned. “Hey Rui, what’re these?”

He glanced back. “We’re in the middle of a battle and you want to eat some Rizz Fruit?”

She pulled one out and tossed it up in the air. Not the perfect weight, but it would do. Solid too. Nice. “Here,” she tossed Rui three of them, “I have a plan.”

He caught them more by instinct than by design. “Oh no. Now I know we’re doomed. Whenever Captain Gale says that nothing good ever happens.””

Amanda ignored him. She whipped out her bat and crouched into a ready stance. “Throw them. Right about here-ish. Hard as you can. And throw them straight so I can aim them better.” Sure, there was very little chance of her connecting with her target, but maybe some long-range bombardment would make him rethink the song-and-dance routine.

Rui looked doubtful. “If you say so,” he said and chucked the first with all his might. Amanda swung and sent it whizzing past his head. It missed the Warchanter badly. He didn’t even look up.

“Again,” she ordered. This one landed closer. The Warchanter slowed and looked around. “Third time’s the charm. Again.” This one, by Providence or luck, struck the goblin right between the eyes. He slumped and fell to the ground, unconscious. Amanda pumped her fist. “Home run, yes! How’s the battle going?”

“We’re losing,” Rui said.

They were. Badly. Captain Gale, a bleeding gash above her eye, led an organized retreat towards the lower decks. Dead and wounded littered the deck. Amanda quickly looked away.

“The problem with ships,” she muttered, “Is that you can’t run away.”

“If I might suggest something,” the Voice said.

“Go ahead,” Amanda said. Rui gave her a strange look.

“The goblin ship,” the Voice explained, “is currently being manned by only a few goblins. You could sneak aboard and disable it.”

“But the goblins are aboard our ship.” Amanda turned away from Rui and began pacing. Perhaps if she pretended to think out-loud, the one-sided conversation wouldn’t seem so strange.

“But the goblins will not abandon their ship,” the Voice said, “They are greedy creatures. The only things goblins care about more than loot are what they already have.”

Amanda nodded. “Alright. That’ll drive them off then.” She turned to Rui. “Grab a rope. We’re swinging across.”

Rui blanched. “What? Are you crazy?”

“How about you answer that question for me,” Amanda replied.

“Yes. You are.” Rui threw up his paws. “Fine. Fine, fine, fine. Let’s go get ourselves killed.”

* * *

It was easy to spot an unattended rope. A number lashed the ships together. The hard part was slipping by and getting to it. But the fighting had moved to the back of the ship now, so a mad dash and desperate grab did the trick. Amanda called upon all her ropes-course knowledge from P.E. class and swung across. She landed heavily on the enemy deck, Rui right behind her. Three very-surprised goblins fumbled for weapons and moved to intercept.

With a snarl, Rui threw himself forward. A sword flashed in his paws and knocked one’s weapon away. He spat in the face of another, who screamed and clawed at

his steaming, bubbling flesh. The third dodged around him, but Amanda slammed her bat into the back of its head and knocked it overboard. Rui and Amanda regarded each other.

“Acid spit,” she said.

His ears lay back against his head. “I know it’s not much. I’m no wizard, but it comes in handy.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s great.” She looked around. The deck was clear. “We should keep going,” she said.

“Time for the next step in the plan,” Rui said, “So tell me, what is the next step?”

She hefted her bat and grinned. “What else? Smash the controls of this ship.”

The bridge of this ship sat at the back. A few goblins more manned the controls. They were not prepared for her to kick the door in. They weren’t prepared to fight either. They leapt away and tried to run.

“Scared?” she roared, “Come here, stinkies. Come within reach of my bat. I dare you.”

They ran for the other door, but the handle melted. Rui grinned and wiped saliva from his jaw. The goblins exchanged glances and drew out little clubs and daggers. They were nervous, but prepared to fight to the death.

“Good,” Amanda smiled at them. “Now stay right there.” She raised her bat and smashed it down on the tiller. It cracked. She sighed. “Rui, little help?”

“What? Oh. Right.” He spat a greenish wad of acid on the tiller. It burned and bubbled. Amanda brought down her bat once more and the thing shattered into useless fragments.

The goblins stepped forward, alarmed. “Ah, ah, ah,” Amanda chided, “Sit. Stay. Good boys.” She grinned and smashed a glass dashboard. “Stay right there and we’ll be out of your hair in a few moments.”

All those delicate, perfectly tuned instruments? Smashed. The padded captain’s seat? Destroyed. The front window? Cracked. It was too hard to break. The ship began to veer off-course.

Amanda didn’t think that goblins could experience grief, but these ones wore expressions very close to it. “Alright, this place is trashed,” she said, “Come on, Rui.”

“What about them?”

“Leave them. We need them to raise the alarm after we leave.”

They ran back to their ship. Captain Gale and her crew were packed in a tight ring, guarding the captain’s cabin from their advances. As expected, a bell rang on the goblin ship and a cry of dismay rose from the borders. Those that could fly fled the battle and went after their ship. Those that couldn’t dove into the water and swam.

Captain Gale raised a cheer. “Victory. That’ll teach the slimy sons-of-a-squid to mess with us. You.” She strode up to Amanda and grinned. “That was some good fighting there. Maybe you’re not the helpless maiden I took you to be. You’ve got spirit, kid.”

“Rui helped,” Amanda said.

“Aye. And he’ll be rewarded generously. I won’t skin him and turn him into a rug for letting you out of the cabin.”

Rui bowed his head. “Thank you, Captain Gale.”

“Oh shut up, you worthless mutt.” Captain Gale turned to the rest of her crew.
“Alright you lot, you know the drill. Throw the dead overboard and get us back underway. I don’t want to be around when the next goblin ship comes.”

Amanda sighed and turned to her fighting companion. “Sorry, Rui. I tried to give you some of the credit.”

“It’s alright,” he said with a shrug, “I’m used to it.”

Amanda thought that the most unjust thing she’d ever heard.

* * *

“Danger is out there. Join the Royal Inquisitors today. Be a part of the solution.”

“I am Grand Inquisitor Selby. Friends, I am here to bring before you a serious situation. Our world is threatened. Our entire existence is threatened. We are at war. ‘War with who?’ you may ask. Humans, my friends, humans.”

Mike sighed and pulled his hood lower over his head. “And I thought ads back home were annoying.”

The capitol wasn’t as medieval as Mike expected. Sure, a lot of the buildings were stone, but such well-carved and smooth stone that it would have required machine-like precision to carve. Or magic. That was the answer to everything around here. Floating market stalls? Magic. Glowing lights that dimmed or brightened as need be? Also magic. Mugs that filled themselves and flew back to their starting place when they were empty again? That talking poster that showed Inquisitor Selby detailing the horrible crimes of humanity? More magic.

Rafe chuckled and pulled his own hood down as well. "Welcome to the Royal City of New Camelot, the jewel of Avalon."

Mike nodded to Selby's animated figure. "No wonder everyone hates humans when that mess plays twenty-four/seven."

"Imagine my surprise when the first one I met didn't try and kill me," Rafe said.

"I could make that argument to the king," Mike offered, "He might let me stay. Or, you know, at least not execute me."

Rafe looked him straight in the eye. "You could tell him. If you have a death-wish."

"No need to be negative all the time."

"At best, he'll exile you."

"Thank you Rafe. I get the picture."

They'd wandered a bit from the crowds into one of the courtyards that sometimes appeared between houses. "I trust that somehow this leads to the palace," Mike said.

"Yes." Rafe puffed out his chest. "I know this city like the back of my paw."

"Humans are a corrupted race," Selby's voice interjected, "given over to evil."

Mike sighed. "There goes one of those posters again." He was tired of hearing Selby's voice. No one was around. He could rip it down and tear it up. That might make him feel better. He turned to do so and froze. That wasn't a poster speaking. "You!"

Selby stood in the shadow of an alley, sword held lightly in his hand. A frown rested on his blank face. "Humans are evil. That is what we were told. They had fallen away from their old virtues. What I don't understand, then." He stepped out into the light. "Is why you saved the Underground."

Rafe pushed Mike behind him. Mike took stock of the exits. Selby blocked the way out to the main road, but there were several smaller paths still open to the left and right. “Inquisitor,” he said warmly, “How good of you to stop by and see us.”

“You left a trail so wide a blind rat could have followed,” Selby stated, “And all those dwarves, they hailed you as a hero. I told them what you were and they didn’t believe me. Me, the Grand Inquisitor.” The shadows around him grew darker. “Human, what are you after? What devious plan rests inside your mind?”

Mike didn’t answer at first. This was all very unexpected and he needed a moment to come up with an appropriate response. “Back home,” he said, “I read a lot of stories. The kind about kids travelling to some magical realm very much like this one and having adventures and saving it from evil. Necromancers, evil wizards, witches, those sorts of things. That’s what I want. That’s what I always dreamed of.”

“And yet here, you’re the evil which threatens the land.” Selby came a step closer.

“So they tell me.” Mike took a step back. Don’t let this go for too long, he warned himself, or else you’ll be trapped against the wall. “And so, I’m packing my things and leaving, if you catch my drift. Once I find my sister, Rafe’s told me he knows a way to leave. I don’t want to leave. This place is freaking cool. But I will. I promise.”

Selby’s grip tightened on his sword. “I have received reports of another human,” he said, “Who fled across the sea to God knows where. I am on my way to present them to the king.”

Mike gasped. “Amanda! You know where she is. Oh thank God.” He smiled. “All this time, I had this horrible fear that she was already dead.”

Rafe reached out a hand to the shadowman. “Inquisitor,” he said, “Hasn’t Mike shown that he’s different? We don’t need to kill him or his sister. We can send them back.”

Selby turned away. “Human. Mike,” he said, “Twice now you have saved citizens of Avalon from death, including Prince Rafe, the heir to the throne. Furthermore, you have helped in the effort against the Cult of the White Fox, the worst rebels and true enemies of the crown.”

Mike barely dared to breath. “Does that mean you’ll let me go?”

“However,” Selby’s voice was hard and sharp. “Your sister, Amanda, has placed herself in league with them. They attacked several of my inquisitors to free her. The cultists then furnished her with a chest of gold and hired a ship to take her wherever she pleases. And my messages to King’s Island are being ignored. I fear treachery. Also, for one who “can’t do magic”, you certainly put on an impressive display down in the Underground.”

“Your point?” Mike asked. He weighed his options. Right or left? Left. If it came to a fight, he was going to run left.

“Simply this,” Selby said, “Your intentions may be innocent.” He brandished his blade. “But your presence is still trouble.”

Rafe’s hands ignited into flame. “So Inquisitor,” he said lightly, “At last you understand my reasons for defending him.”

“Rafe,” Selby said, “Do not fear. I will not execute him. I will even recommend against it to the King. But until the threat he and his sister pose is assessed, he can’t go free. Perhaps his captivity will make his sister reconsider her position.”

“Hostage,” Mike said, “You want me to be your hostage.”

“Correct.”

“That’ll go over real well.”

Rafe’s eyes flicked between them. “Rafe,” Selby said, “You’re without a doubt the most troublesome prince Avalon has ever had. I’ve known you since the day you were born and I know we both want the same thing: the safety and security for the people of Avalon. But now you see, it’s not as pretty as it is in your books. Sometimes, you have to make hard choices.”

Rafe hesitated. “Promise me he won’t be hurt. And he’ll be treated well. We can give him the tower cell, the one with all the pillows and the fireplace.”

“We will make him as comfortable as if he were in his own house,” Selby promised.

Mike felt a stab of something. Fear? Yes, there was fear. Hurt as well. Betrayal. “Rafe?”

“It’s for the best, Mike.” The prince didn’t look him in the eye. “The plan’s still the same. It’ll be easier to find your sister with father’s help. He can send the Royal Guard out looking for her. They’re better equipped to handle whatever trouble she’s in than we are. I’m sure father will see that it’s wrong to kill you.”

“And yet you were the one who told me he wouldn’t.” Mike’s voice grew a little heated. “If I die, it will be on your head. So, how confident are you that the king won’t kill me?”

“It would be unnecessary and unreasonable,” Selby said.

“I asked Rafe,” Mike said. Selby glowered.

Rafe's face was troubled. "I think..."

An eye opened in the wall behind Selby and Rafe. Before Mike could shout a warning, a beam of red shot from the pupil and blasted Selby in the back. He let out a cry and fell to the ground. Rafe whirled and shielded the Inquisitor with his body. Mike ducked left and dove for cover.

"You poor, poor fools," a willowy, thin voice like the passing of the wind through old bones hissed, "Did you know a Shadowlord's body is mostly composed of empty space? And that, with the proper application of a discrete increase in gravity, even if only for a moment, you can stun them quite effectively."

Rafe threw a fireball at the eye. It winked and disappeared. The flames splattered harmlessly against the stone wall. "Ah, pyromancy. A common branch of study. Very potent. However, it does require being able to hit your target, young prince."

Rafe crouched low of Selby. "You're not getting him."

"I'm not after him," the stranger replied, "I'm after you and the human. For I am..."

"A cultist of the White Fox," Mike said, "You all sure get around."

"Correct. And I must thank you for so kindly heading to the back alleys. Where you're all alone and no one can hear you."

"Who or what are you?" Mike demanded.

The eye opened up right in front of him. He yelped and darted away. "Ask your foxy friend, human," the creature replied with a laugh.

Several options ran through Mike's head. One, this creature lived inside of the walls. Thus, destroying the buildings should harm it. Two, it was invisible except for an

eye, which only appeared when it opened. That was ridiculous, but possible in a world full of magic. Third, it was tricking them somehow.

“Ideas, Rafe?” he asked.

“It might be...” Rafe racked his brain, “A Fanfasm?”

“Aw, I’m flattered. You know of us. But also insulted it took you so long to remember.” The creature cackled. “Yes. It is one of those dread, dangerous, debonair masters of magic, a Fanfasm. You might as well give up. You’ll never match my power.”

“Illusionist,” Rafe growled, “Great.”

“I thought you did illusions,” Mike said.

“I do. Sometimes.”

“Then shouldn’t this be easy?”

The Fanfasm laughed. “Oh, I should hope not! I stake my reputation on being very hard to pin down.”

Rafe’s look was sour, but he held up a hand. A wave of flame, weak and barely more than hot air, washed over the courtyard. A rough shape appeared in the corner, humanoid but the size of a small child. “There,” Mike shouted. With all his might, Rafe threw a fireball. It passed right through the shape and splattered against the wall.

Laughter came from behind them. “Ooh, close one. That’s a lie. You missed so completely it isn’t even worth mentioning.”

Mike’s mouth dropped. “How?”

“Illusionist,” Rafe repeated, “Fun to be, horrible to face.”

“And the Fanfasm are the undisputed masters of it. Our island home is a utopia of deception and deceit. We of all the Seven Isles have never bowed to the King of

Avalon. We are greater even than the dragons. Mightier than the giants. And more master of the night than the vampires and their ilk. Surrender, Feyfolk Prince. And you too, human. I promise you a comfortable reception as the White Fox razes this place to the ground.”

“Rafe,” Mike whispered, “Fanfasms have a body, right?”

“Yes,” Rafe answered, “Hidden by an invisibility spell.”

“You have an invisibility spell.”

“A much better one than anything I could ever dream of doing. Nothing magical will penetrate it. Nothing.”

Right then. Rafe was cranky. That couldn’t be good if his usual happy-go-lucky, I-am-here-to-save-the-day attitude had deserted him. Angered, Mike stomped a foot on the ground. A small puff of dust drifted into the air. He stared at it for a second. Then, he frantically began kicking the ground, sending up clouds of dust.

“What are you doing?” The Fanfasm’s voice was confused and curious. “That’s not part of a spell, is it? No, it can’t be. I’d know it.”

“Mike,” Rafe hissed, “At the risk of being an echo, what are you doing?”

“Well, there’s this old tactic that ninjas use,” Mike replied, “When they want to hide, they throw up a lot of dust or smoke. We’ll have to improvise.” He stared at Rafe. “Rafe, fireball the ground. Now.”

“What?”

“Now.”

Rafe, confused and a little disconcerted, threw a fireball at the ground. It exploded and kicked up a huge cloud of dust. That, combined with the dirt already in the air from

Mike's efforts, filled the courtyard. This time, Mike spotted a small form standing in one of the alleys, leaning against the wall. "There."

Not bothering to stop and question, Rafe threw everything he had into a stream of fire. A shrill scream tore the air. The little figure began to dance around, waving his tiny arms and beating at his flaming clothes. "Put it out!" he cried.

Rafe glanced sideways at Mike. "That was clever. How did you think that one up?"

"Easy." Mike pointed to the scorched sand. "Made a smokebomb. You said no magic could penetrate it, but I was willing to bet that plain old dirt would still paint a nice target on his face. I needed a way to get a lot of it in the air."

The sound of metal boots and shouting voices approached from one of the alleys. A full complement of guardsmen burst onto the scene, weapons drawn and teeth bared. "Prince Rafe?" the sergeant said. He dropped to his knees. "Prince Rafe is here. All hail the prince."

Rafe drew himself up and smoothed out his tunic. "Er, yes. Hi, everyone. Everything is fine here." The Fanfasm was still screaming. Rafe glanced at him. "Well, at least it is now."

"My apologies, oh prince," the sergeant said, "We heard an explosion and saw the fire, so we came running as soon as we could."

Mike frowned. "An explosion. As in one. Did you somehow miss all of the others?"

"For the last time," Rafe said, "Illusionist. No sight or sound would have escaped until we broke his concentration."

Mike loved magic. Being here was a dream come true. But at the same time, he really hated it.

The guards seized the Fanfasm and began beating out the flames. It didn't resist, dejected, defeated, bested and caught. Another two crouched over Selby and declared that he was alright, simply fast asleep. The sergeant cleared his throat and looked at Mike. "And who is this, might I ask?"

"Matthew," Mike said, "I'm Matthew." Rafe glanced sideways at him but said nothing.

"Matthew," the guard repeated, "Are you in league with that foul creature that threatened our prince?"

"No!" Rafe cleared his throat. "No, I suppose this is the second time he's saved my life."

"It was more of a group effort," Mike countered.

The sergeant's eyes popped out of his head. "Saved the prince," he declared, "Well, the king will want to see you immediately. Come, to the Royal Palace."

Mike took a sharp breath. Ten guards, trapped in the Royal City, and they knew what he looked like. No way he could escape. On the other hand, he was going in as a hero. This was what he wanted, right? Why not? He put a smile on his face. "Indeed. To the Royal Palace."

* * *

“There it is. The legendary Kingstomb,” Rui said. He handed Amanda the telescope. “Well, not so much legendary. No ships come here. Well, there are a few from the Royal Navy. They handle imports and there are no exports. No reason for merchants to make the trip.”

“And.” Amanda pointed. “There’s a giant storm surrounding the entire thing.”

“And there’s a giant storm that always surrounds the entire thing,” Rui corrected, “It’s possible to get through, or else the captain wouldn’t have agreed to this trip, but very risky. There’s a fey-road which will take people too and fro, but the king has limited its use with a ban.”

“Let’s pretend I don’t know what that is,” Amanda said.

“A law enforced by spells,” Rui said patiently. He opened his mouth as if to ask something, but shook his head and growled. “This one prevents any more than five people from traveling on it per day.”

“In short, no one goes there,” Amanda said, “Not because it’s hostile, but because there’s no point.”

“Right. Exactly.”

Amanda sighed. Well, that storm didn’t look friendly. “You, uh, wouldn’t happen to have anything for seasickness, would you?”

* * *

Amanda had wanted to watch. Despite everything, she wanted to see the ship cleave its way through the storm. However, now that she stood on the deck held steady

only by a simple rope harness, she regretted her choices. The storm tossed the ship and battered its hull like a cat playing with a mouse before devouring it whole. Still, hardly as bad as Captain Gale had promised when they'd discussed the ordeal.

Captain Gale stood by the tiller, the railing held tight in her grip. "Steady as she goes," she shouted, "Don't drift off-course. Watch the rocks."

For their part, the crew were doing an admirable job. Despite losing a good ten of their number in the goblin attack, the ship operated as well as before. Despite herself, Amanda was a little impressed.

And then, as everything seemed to be going smoothly and the ship was breaking through the last of the storm, a mermaid leapt out of a towering wave and landed on the deck.

Captain Gale cursed in surprise. "What's she doing down there?" A second and then a third joined her. Their tails were long, more like eels than fish, and coiled around the railings and anything that they could find. They stood upright and stared silently at Amanda, at the crew, and at the captain. Then one let out a long, mournful cry.

"Wail!" Her voice was louder than even the subsiding storm. "Wail for the doom of Avalon. Ah, that this wicked day hadn't come so soon."

Gale drew her blade and strode onto the deck. Amanda fumbled at her harness, trying to free herself. "Hey, fish-brains. Get off my ship."

The three pointed at her. "Oh Captain, wail. Wail for the doom you have brought on us all."

Captain Gale was losing her patience. She menaced the three creatures with her sword. “Have it your way. Speak in riddles all you want. I know your twisted kind. But get off my ship or I’ll gut you and serve you up for dinner.”

The three drew themselves up and pointed at her. “Wail, for you have carried the human to the resting place of Arthur. With sword in hand, the fate of this world is decided. Wail!”

“Human?” Gale glanced back at Amanda. “You mean her?”

The mermaids slipped from the deck and disappeared without another word.

Captain Gale stormed towards Amanda, blade brandished. “Now see here,” she said with a feral snarl, “I want answers. Are you a human, girl?”

“Do not answer her,” the Voice instructed. Amanda remained silent.

“You don’t deny it.” Captain Gale stated. The last of the storm died. An island, beautiful beyond belief crowned with golden-leaved trees, was a short distance away. Captain Gale glanced between it and Amanda.

“I should kill you,” the captain growled. She fingered her sword.

“And I couldn’t stop you,” Amanda replied honestly, “You, all of you, even Rui, are more than a match for me.” The captain stepped back in surprise. “But I am trying to save my brother. You have taken me this far. Is it too much to ask for a few hundred more feet?”

Captain Gale frowned and studied Amanda. That ridiculous metal club, good enough against goblins, would bounce off her scaly hide. Her lips curled into a snarl. She strode toward Amanda, rage rising within in. She opened her mouth wide and roared in Amanda’s face. The girl stepped back, nervous. Gale raised her sword high and drove it

straight into the deck. “Never let it be said that I went back on a contract.” The words came in low, forced, like a hiss of air escaping an over-inflated tire. She turned, casual and cool. “Lower the rowboat. I want her off my ship.”

Amanda wanted to protest, convince them of her innocence and rightness, but the Voice stopped her. “No. They have served their purpose. As long as they do not hinder you, do not interfere.”

Amanda soon found herself stepping into the rowboat. She turned and nodded to the Captain. “Thank you for your help. I’ll be sure to tell my brother about you.” The captain schooled her expression and became stony-faced. “I’m ready. Lower the boat.”

The crew went to the winch. It plopped into the ocean and Amanda took the oars. But the tiny boat rocked. A flash of fur and bright eyes landed in front of her. She gasped. “Rui. Hey, you’re going to tilt the boat.”

“Cabin boy,” Gale growled, “Get back on the ship.”

Rui hesitated. He looked between Gale and Amanda. A strangled word came from his mouth. “No.” He glared up at her. His voice grew stronger. “No, Captain, I won’t.”

Gale leaned over the edge, furious. “Might I remind you,” she said, “Who pulled you out of the gutter. Who fed you, clothed you, and gave you a warm bed. I taught you everything you know. Now. Get. Back. On. This. Ship.”

“Captain Gale,” Rui said, “I will never repay the debt I owe you. And afterwards, I will serve you twice as hard. But this is more important. Something has to be done. And you won’t do it.”

“You can’t be serious.” Gale frowned, alarmed. “You better not be joining forces with this human.”

“No.” Rui’s eyes turned to Amanda, burning. “I’m going to watch her. I’m going to make sure she doesn’t doom the world.” He shrank a bit into himself. “It’s not like you’ll miss me much anyway. But she needs watching.”

A worried smile appeared on Amanda’s face. “Hey, there’s no need for that.”

Rui’s eyes didn’t leave her. His paw was on his sword. “I disagree.” He smiled humorlessly. “Courage to do what’s right, remember? Not going to let a human walk around unescorted.”

Gale stared at them both. With a grunt and a shrug, she turned. “I wash my hands of this. Set course for Avalon. I’ll be in my cabin. Someone bring me a drink.”

* * *

“What are you doing?” the Voice demanded.

Amanda panted. “Well, I’m trying to lose...” Her lungs and legs gave up and she fell to her knees. Within a few seconds, Rui stepped up alongside her, whistling cheerfully. He patted her on the back. “I hate you,” she said.

Rui smiled down at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “And you told me you were a trained, what, ‘athlete’.”

Amanda gritted her teeth. “Yes. For short. Powerful. Dashes. Not long, cross-country sprints through unknown forests.” She put a hand on her bat. His paw drifted near his sword.

“Come. We should keep moving,” he said pleasantly, “Kingstomb Fort is nearby. Or did you have some other destination in mind.”

Amanda smiled sweetly at him and offered a hand. “Help me up?” He took a nervous step back, expecting some trick.

“Congratulations,” the Voice drawled, “Today, you made a potential ally your greatest liability.”

She forced her smile to new levels of friendliness, good-heartedness, and open generosity. “Rui,” she cooed, “I’m not your enemy. I’m only trying to save my brother.”

“So you told me,” he said, “And I wonder what that entails.”

Amanda laughed. “He’s my brother. It’s not like I’m doing anything bad.”

He regarded her. “Bad things can be done for good reasons. I want to know what you intend to do.”

Amanda didn’t answer, for which the Voice praised her, and he turned away. “Nevermind then. I suppose if I follow you long enough I’ll find out.”

She rose under her own power and brushed leaves off her clothes. Not that it did much good, she reflected grimly. Wearing clothes for days on end quickly turned them into rags. “Follow then,” she said with curtness, “But do not try and stop me.”

Riu eyed her. “We will see.”

Amanda strode off, stomping through the undergrowth. She liked Rui well enough, but he was too clever for his own good. Brave, smart, quick on his feet. Were he human, he might be worth dating, she mused. But he’d always been watching her. From the moment he’d pulled her out of the ocean, he’d been watching. And it didn’t seem like he was going to stop anytime soon.

“Which way?” she asked the Voice.

“Straight ahead.”

Lucky her. Her schizophrenia had a GPS attached.

* * *

“Why are we headed here?” Amanda whispered, wary of Rui.

“I don’t know where on the island the sword is kept,” the Voice stated, “Neither does your faithful shadow. Therefore, here we are.”

Amanda stared at the gates of the Royal Guard outpost. Even here, it seemed, the king of Avalon had some influence. And of course, why wouldn’t he? He would be a fool not to place watch on the most powerful sword ever made. “I suppose you have a plan.”

“Go in. Introduce yourself. Make some friends. And try not to beat anyone’s brains out. Then, ask where the tomb of King Arthur lies. I hope being nice isn’t too much to ask of you.”

“Watch it,” Amanda snapped, “I’m in no mood for sarcasm.”

“Talking to yourself again?” Rui called, “You know, if you make a habit of it, people might think you’re a little crazy.”

Amanda ground her teeth. “Thank you, Rui. You’re so perceptive and helpful.”

He bowed with a flourish. “I try.”

Amanda admired his spunk and wished he’d never listened to her when she spoke of courage. He’d become very troublesome. If he kept it up, she might have to deal with him.

She shook her head. When did she start thinking like that? It shook her, more than facing goblins. What was she becoming? It couldn’t be anything bad. She was trying to

save her brother. “Bad things can be done for good reasons,” Rui had said. She felt a little cold.

No. Not when she was so close. Excalibur was somewhere on this island and she was going to find it. Steeling herself, she made for the gate.

The guard was surprised to see anyone coming close to the gate and questioned her with suspicion. “Where did you come from?” “Who are you?” “What’s your purpose here?” He didn’t much like her responses. Rui stood back, watching. When the guard asked him, he only responded with “I’m here with her. Ask her. She has all the answers.”

After another round of questioning, the guard gave up. “If that’s the way you want it,” he said with hot flame in his voice, “You can spend the night in a cold cell and we can try again in the morning.”

“Hold.” A voice called from the top of the wall. Another guard, skin red as a tomato, peered down at them. “Tamalby,” he said to the guard, “Do you know what day it is?”

The guard hesitated. “It’s the Feast of Berries, Sergeant.”

The man nodded, satisfied. “Good. And tell me, what sort of people would we be if we didn’t welcome guests on this day?”

The guard lowered his spear. “This is not...we can’t...what I mean to say is.” He cleared his throat. “We don’t know why they are here. ‘Seeing the sights’,” the guard looked pointedly at Amanda, “is not a valid reason to come to Kingstomb.”

“Sure it is,” Amanda insisted with a smile. The guard glared at her.

“Then by all means, keep them under watch,” the sergeant said, annoyed, “But land’s sakes, don’t lock them up. Invite them in. Perhaps, after a warm meal and before a roaring fire, they will talk.”

The guard pressed his lips together, but stood aside. “You will enter,” he stated.

Amanda flashed a smile at him. “Why thank you.” Rui said nothing.

The sergeant greeted them on the other side of the gates. “Welcome to Kingstomb Fort,” he said, “I am Sargent Morr of the watch.” A strange light was in his eyes. He studied Amanda. “Come with me.” Rui moved to follow. “Not you. You stay here.”

Rui pulled up short, an unreadable expression on his face, but he obeyed. Nervousness rose in Amanda’s breast. The sergeant’s shoulders were broad and strong. She didn’t think she could resist him if he attacked.

The moment they were in private, he turned to her. “The White Fox will rise,” he said. Amanda’s tension evaporated, but a strange knot remained in her stomach.

“Perfect. You’re on my side,” she said. She addressed the Voice. “Didn’t think to clue me in about this, did you?”

“I enjoy watching you fret sometimes,” the Voice admitted.

“I know of your mission,” the Sergeant said, “There are a few of the devoted in this fort. We will shield you from questions and assist you however we can.”

Amanda nodded. “Excalibur. I need to find Excalibur.” The man smiled.

“That can be arranged.” He began to pace. “Drug the feast, yes, leave the gate unlocked, yes, and then you must have a map.” He clapped her on the shoulder. “Come. We must speak to Elder Tomas.”

Elder Tomas looked the closest to a wizard of any person she'd met during this miserable trip. Long blue robe, pointed hat, and beard that trailed around his ankles. He snoozed in the noon sun. "Follow my lead," the Sergeant said, "Good afternoon, Elder."

The napping man leapt up. "Hmm?" He blinked several times. "Sergeant. Good to see you." He smiled with an open, earnest grin. The sergeant's was more reserved.

"This girl," he said, "Is interested in your book."

The old man's eyes lit up. "Ah-ha, the history of Avalon. Would you happen to be a fellow scholar?" He chuckled. "One in training perhaps."

Amanda smiled back.

"It would be best," the sergeant said, leaning close, "If you took us to your office."

Elder Tomas nodded eagerly and pulled Amanda towards a wooden building. "Come, come," he said, "We have much to discuss."

The elder's office was a mess of papers and books. He rummaged through them, chattering fast enough to make her eyes glaze over. The sergeant winked at her and whispered, "Keep him distracted," before he too began to search through some other papers. Maps of some kind.

Amanda did that. Elder Tomas happily discussed whatever she wished, often turning to fetch some book or scroll to reference as he relayed tales of Avalon's founding, the first humans to arrive, and how the Feyfolken came to be. At her surprise, he smiled. "Yes, child. All Feyfolken are descended from humans. Here, Albus's manuscript claims that we are all descended from the kidnapped victims of the True Fae, who delighted to

change our shapes and teach us magic. We are a sort of half-breed: half-human and half-fae.”

Amanda wasn't sure what to think of that. “Have any other humans come here? After that time?”

“Oh yes, many. Though none recently,” the elder answered, “Bartimaus the Martyr, Marcus Cassius Tacitus. Bann the Boar, and Charles Miller among others. And of course, there is the legendary King Arthur upon whose tomb this fortress has been built.”

Amanda paused. “Were they good people?”

The elder frowned. “No. Not all of them.” He shifted. “I see you're referring to the king's recent laws forbidding any humans to live on the Seven Isles of Avalon. You want to know if it is a decision, correct?” Amanda nodded. “That is a tricky situation,” Tomas said, “it is easier to answer your actual question. I will try that first.”

“You must remember, child, that in order to be good a person must live in accordance with certain principles. Unchanging, eternal principles. Those who fail or base their lives off other things are not good, no matter how nice, charming, clever, or witty they are. Even if they live by other, self-generated principles, they are not good. When you ask, ‘were they good?’, I can confidently answer that at least one of them was. King Arthur.”

“Well, if I had to pick one, I would have guess him,” Amanda said, “These principles, I assume you know what they are.”

“As does everyone,” the old man said, “Though not everyone chooses to follow them. They are written on our souls. It is hard to hear them because our souls are tainted. Our natural desires lead to evil, not good.”

“But what about love of family?” Amanda asked, “That isn’t evil.”

Elder Tomas coughed. “My apologies. I fear I haven’t been speaking clearly. There are many good things in this world, but doing them does not make a man good. A thief and murderer loves his parents. A tyrant can give to the poor. Doing what is good does not make you good, if that makes sense.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Amanda’s voice grew heated. “Are you saying that if I did everything right, I’m still not a good person?”

“The good,” Elder Tomas said gravely, “Is often the worst enemy of the best.”

These words stung Amanda like a slap in the face. The sergeant, however, held up a map and nodded. She rose. “Thank you, elder, for your time. Will I see you at the feast tonight?”

Tomas grinned. “Why yes of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. It will be an evening to remember.”

Inwardly, Amanda smiled. “And let’s hope tomorrow is even better.”

* * *

“Announcing, Prince Rafe and Matthew McConroy of the Western Reaches.”

Mike had prepared himself for many things when he entered the throne room. Awe, overwhelming majesty, statues so life-like they moved, paintings so beautiful he

fell down and wept, and especially a throne made of purest diamond that glittered and sparkled bright enough to blind him. He didn't expect a kitchen.

True, everything familiar about a kitchen had been replaced with magical items. The stove, the oven, the toaster, even the lights all ran off fire magic. Yet he still recognized it as a kitchen. A diamond throne did stand in the corner, covered in a layer of dust, but he couldn't see any other "royal" items laying about.

A fox, like Rafe but darker and taller with flecks of grey about his muzzle, rushed forward to meet them. He swept Rafe up in his arms and clasped him to his broad chest. "Ah, my son." Relief and happiness filled his voice. "I'm so glad you're safe. When I heard the news that you'd been captured, and by a human no less. I feared the worst."

Rafe settled into the hug and clasped his arms around his father. "I've had quite the adventure, I must admit."

The king set him down and ruffled his ears. "Nevermind that. It's over now. And you're not leaving the palace for at least a month. Not until this human mess and the problem of the cultists is ironed out."

Rafe's expression turned to dismay. "But that's not fair. You can't keep me indoors."

"Rafe." The king cupped the prince's chin with a paw. "If anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself. You're all I have left." He sighed. "And it's too dangerous out there right now."

"I'm the hero of the people. I can't hide from danger."

"The people do not need another dead hero," the king snapped. Rafe looked down. "I'm sorry, but please, do this for me."

Mike pretended to look elsewhere. My word, that mural was very interesting. All those colors and people and...and... Mike had no idea what he was looking at. Rafe took a step back and dropped his eyes. "I will do as you wish, father."

The king patted him on the head. "Thank you." He straightened and turned to Mike. "Ah! The hero of the hour." He took Mike's hand and held it. "I heard it was you who saved my son from a terrible fate. From a Fanfasm, no less, Truly, you're a credit to us all."

Mike bowed. "Of course, your majesty. I couldn't stand by and do nothing. Wouldn't have been heroic of me."

The king glanced sideways at Rafe. "I see you and my son have much in common," he said, "Though I am curious. Inquisitor Selby sent me a report a few days ago that mentioned you had been captured by a human." The King looked at Rafe. "You understand that this raises some concerns."

Mike's heart hammered in his chest. He'd been an idiot to walk right in here. Of course the king would figure it out. He'd have to be an idiot not to see. Rafe, however, frowned. "Inquisitor Selby jumps at his own shadow. Listening to him would make you think humans hid around every corner, waiting to unleash their terrible magic upon the world."

The king let out a short, barking laugh. "True, true. Zeal is both his strength and weakness. But this report seemed much more detailed than any previous ones." The king glanced at Mike. Mike looked for the nearest exit. Perhaps if he ducked behind that cabinet, he'd almost make it to the door before he was cooked alive. "Tell me, Rafe, how did you escape?"

Rafe took it in stride. “Well, you can thank Matthew for that again.”

A strange look came into the king’s eyes, but a smile appeared on his face. “Well, yet another thing to your credit, young man,” he said.

“Wait a second,” Mike said, “Before you continue, I have to ask, how do you know I’m not human?”

For a moment, Mike thought he’d caught the king off guard. But then he smiled. “Well, that’d be because you saved my son and aren’t trying to destroy the world.” Mike nodded in agreement. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. The king continued. “I hope you will stay with us for a short while.” He smiled. “You see, it would not be right to send you on your way without a small feast. And, I may or may not have worked out a new recipe for cake that I was hoping to serve.”

“Cake?” Mike’s mouth watered. “Hey, I can’t say no to cake.”

The king laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Then let it be so.” He glanced around. “Hmm, now where did I put that old thing? Ah, Matthew, behind you. If you would grab that off the hook and bring it to me.”

Mike turned and saw a very large apron with the words, “To the Royal Chef, from his Bride,” stitched across it. “Sure.”

The king donned it with a grateful smile. “This was a gift, you know,” he told Mike. Rafe groaned. The king ignored him. “Back in the tenth year of my reign, my wife gave this to me. I’ve used it ever since. There are many fond memories attached to this thing. But there was that one time when my wife and I couldn’t find Rafe, no matter how much we searched. Wouldn’t you know it, we found him curled up in the...”

“Father,” Rafe interrupted, mortified. The king raised an eyebrow. “Hadn’t you better get started on dinner if we’re going to eat before sunset?”

The king sighed. “Right you are. There will be time for stories later, no doubt.” He smiled at Rafe. “Why don’t you take your friend on a tour of the palace while you wait?”

“I was going to show him the library,” Rafe said.

The king’s eyes lit up. “A wonderful idea. Yes, find a book and read it. If it’s a common one, I don’t see why you couldn’t keep it. A good day’s work deserves some reward.”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Mike made for the door. “I’d better be on my way then.”

“Yes, yes. Off with you. I’ll have the guards call you when it’s time for dinner.” The king pulled the apron on and tied it around his middle. “Now, to meet my destiny. In the kitchen.”

Rafe and Mike slipped out of the throne room and headed further up the opulent palace. “Your father seems...”

“Paranoid? Cowardly? Spineless?” Rafe asked.

“Nice,” Mike countered.

Rafe blinked. “Nice?”

“Yep.” Mike grinned. “And if the cake is any good, he’ll be in the running for best friend’s dad.”

“It is,” Rafe said, “Cooking’s the one thing he does well.”

Mike's expression fell. He cleared his throat. "Mine wouldn't have noticed if I went missing. He was never home. Yours, I can tell he cares."

Rafe cleared his throat. "The library is up ahead. I don't know how we're going to get to the Book of Records, but you've been pretty resourceful so far. This shouldn't be too much trouble, given your track record. We've got to watch out for the librarian and her assistants."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Is she another shriveled old crone? Because I've seen enough of those thanks to the Ragged Sisters."

"No." Rafe smirked and gestured toward the door. "She's a dragon."

Mike blanched. "A what?"

Rafe threw the door open and pulled him inside. "Come on, 'Matthew'. There's nothing to be scared of."

Mike fought hard against the prince's grip. He remembered his bedtime stories. Fire and gold and death. "I know all about dragons. And the last thing I want to do is walk into one's lair."

"A touching sentiment, and a wise one," a booming voice said. Mike froze and looked up. Suspended by massive, gilded chains, an enormous palanquin hung from the ceiling. On it sat a dragon, big as a mobile home, with eyeglasses perched on her nose and a book held between her claws.

"Hi." Mike gave a small, timid wave.

"It is good to know that some still hold us in high regard. Unlike others I could mention" She glared at the fox-prince. "Prince Rafe. What have I told you about walking

barefoot on my carpet? Especially after you've been traipsing about heaven-knows-where."

Rafe smiled wide enough to display his full set of needle-sharp teeth. It was supposed to be sheepish, but all Mike could think of was how many pointy things were in the room with him. "But Meerax, I washed them this time.

"I don't care. This is my library." She leveled a glare at him. "and it might as well be my own sovereign kingdom. You will do as I say. Clear?"

Rafe's ears drooped. "Yes ma'am. I'll go get some slippers." He darted for the door. Mike made to follow, but Meerax called to him.

"And you," she said, "Who are you?"

He turned. A bead of sweat trailed down his head. Jerkily, he bowed. "Matthew, your royal scaliness. A pleasure to meet you." Could dragons read minds? He hoped not. She'd fry him if she knew why he was here.

She looked way too pleased with his words. Mike made note of that. Flattery. That's how you kept on a dragon's good side. "The pleasure is mine. So, Matthew, what is it you wish inside my library?"

Mike glanced toward the door. "Oh, Rafe was showing me the place. Didn't mean to intrude. I'll be on my way."

"Nonsense." Meerax plopped to the floor and approached him. "There must be something here that strikes your fancy."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't had the chance to explore." Mike racked his brain for something to say. "How about you tell me where I'm not allowed to go and I'll come back and look for something on my own?"

Meerax beamed at him. “Respect for the rules. Rafe could learn a thing or two from you.” Mike chuckled and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “Well, though no sections are truly forbidden, you would be wise to never go into the king’s private collection. Many dangerous books and secrets lie in there, including the Book of Records.” She bared her teeth. “Also, I would be forced to devour you afterwards. It’s the terms of my contract.”

Mike gulped. “Right then. I’m going to find Rafe now.” He took another step toward the door. She didn’t stop him. “Talk to you later.”

Rafe stood right outside, a huge grin on his face. “You think you’re so clever,” Mike fumed.

“Guilty as charged.” Rafe’s grin faded. He dropped his voice to a whisper and led Mike away from the door. “But you see the problem now? You can’t walk in and read the book.”

Mike glared. “Oh believe me, I saw.” He stopped and gestured for Rafe to hand him something. “Well, let’s have it.”

Rafe tilted his head to the side. “Have what?”

“Magic,” Mike said, “I’m sure you’ve got something. Some magical doodad that will make all my problems go away. An invisibility ring that will let me waltz in past the dragon and read the book. So, hand it over.”

Rafe wordlessly grabbed Mike’s arm and dragged him down the hall. He pushed his way into a soft, cushy bedroom filled with pillows and books. Rafe pushed Mike down into a giant pile of both. “Hey, what’s the big idea?”

Rafe plopped down opposite him, a thin smile on his face. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.” He rifled through a drawer and pulled out a ring. “Not invisible, but it will disguise you like one of Meerax’s servants.” He smirked. “You know the power of illusion magic now, right?”

“Great,” Mike reached for it. Rafe’s hands snapped shut. “Rafe? Come on, man, give it to me.”

“This was a gift,” Rafe said. His expression was guarded and his voice distant. “From my father.”

“That’s nice. I’ve met him now.”

“He used it to teach me the basics of illusions.” Rafe ran a paw over it, examining the contours.

Mike stared at him. “Alright. Not sure what to say to that.” He threw up his arms. “Rafe, I don’t know what you’re getting at here. Spell it out for me.” Heh. Spell. Magic. Mike mentally smacked himself. Puns only got you in trouble.

Rafe looked up, eyes narrow. “He told me that he trusted me to do what’s right. Look, it’s written on the inside here. He may or may not have meant it, but I’ve always tried to.” He leaned forward. “Mike, am I doing what’s right?”

Mike sputtered. “Of course you are. You’re helping me find my sister. Nothing’s wrong with that.”

Rafe considered that. “The past couple of days,” he said, “I’ve broken you out of prison, run from the lawfully appointed authorities, and lied to my father.” He shook his head. “I mean, it started out as a good thing. It went wrong somewhere.”

“Speaking of those authorities,” Mike said, “We need to hurry. When Selby’s done with his nap, he’ll head straight to the king, and then it’s curtains for me.”

“For you,” Rafe corrected.

“Right. For me.” He held out his hand. “So may I please have that ring?”

“On one condition,” Rafe said.

Mike’s heart sank. “What’s that?”

Rafe’s eyes drilled into Mike’s. “After you’ve read the book,” he said, “We’re telling my father. I’m his son. It’s my kingdom too. I need to make this right.”

Mike opened his mouth. He shut it again. Rafe was serious about this. Very serious. “If I remember,” he said, “You told me your father would kill me if he knew I was human.”

“Yes. I did,” Rafe admitted, “But going behind his back doesn’t make me comfortable.”

“Oh, you’re not comfortable.” Mike threw up his hands. “Well, that changes everything. I’ll march up and say, ‘Hello, King Starchaser. I’m a human, one of those people you hate. Please don’t skewer me and mount my head on a pike.’ I’m sure he’ll see reason.”

“With my word and Selby’s and your track record, he’ll have to,” Rafe countered, “Make sure you find some good news in the Book of Records. We need all the help we can get.”

Mike took a deep breath. “This is asking a lot, you know.”

“Yes.” Rafe looked down. “You were right though.”

“Of course I was. But for the sake of argument, what was I right about?”

“My father,” Rafe said, “He is nice. He’s scared. I don’t remember much about my mother. She died in the rebellion when I was small. But they say father was better whenever she was with him.” Rafe looked Mike in the eye. “If he could let go of his fear, things would be better.”

Mike’s lips cracked into a resigned smile. “Agreed,” he said. Hey, this didn’t have to turn out badly. Maybe, maybe the king would see it his way. He needed to polish up his silver tongue first. He smiled at Rafe and drew himself up. “After all, what is a hero’s life without a little risk and danger?”

Rafe giggled. “Thank you, Mike.”

Mike swallowed to try and get some moisture back in his throat. Who was he kidding? He was totally going to die. “No problem.”

* * *

It was midnight and the moon hung full in the sky. Amanda stopped pretending to sleep and slipped from her bed. She crept out into the hall past the guard stationed at her door. He slumped against the wall, snores coming from under his helmet. The sergeant and his compatriots had come through.

The fort was asleep. The guards sat curled up in warm blankets at their posts, eyes watching nothing but their own lids. The rest slept in their much warmer beds. All was quiet and no one stopped her. This was easy. The gate was unlocked, as promised. Amanda giggled. With the map at her side and the full moon overhead, there was no way she’d fail.

A paw snaked out and grabbed her shoulder. She stifled a yelp and whirled. Rui's eyes bore into hers. "What," he hissed, "Did you do?"

"Me? Nothing," Amanda said with a shrug.

Rui growled. "A spell. You cast a spell."

"Something like that," Amanda admitted, "Sleeping potion. In the drink. They won't wake up unless we wake them up." She pushed the main gate open and slipped outside. "Come on."

"No."

Amanda chuckled. "But I thought you wanted to watch."

Rui hesitated. His eyes flicked between her and the walls. He licked his lips. "I should raise the alarm."

"Then do it," Amanda snapped, "But can you get them up before I disappear into the woods? Can you track me?"

He growled and fell in behind her, but with trepidation. Amanda's eyes read the map and sought out the forbidden trail amongst the trees. It wasn't hard to spot in the bright moonlight. It glowed ever so faintly, like a ribbon in the land. She stepped onto it and strode forward.

"Wait!" Rui hissed, "We aren't supposed to go that way."

"We're going to do a lot of things tonight that we aren't supposed to do," Amanda replied, "Come on."

"And hurry," the Voice added, "We're cutting things close. The potion won't last long."

"It's a short walk", Amanda said, "It shouldn't be too hard."

“It’s a maze. Without that map, you’d be lost forever.”

“I see.” She turned back to Rui and grabbed his paw. “Voice in my head says we should hurry. So now we hurry.”

“That’s not a good reason to...” She cut him off by yanking him down the trail and setting off at a brisk pace. The large, looming branches hung down from above and closed them off from the sky. Soon, the path twisted and split, but the Voice and the map guided Amanda through. Rui remained silent, tail tucked between his legs and ears flat against his head, like a dog scared of lightning.

“Oh grow up,” Amanda said half-playfully, “It’s not that scary. Just trees and a path.”

“Many things that are dangerous aren’t,” Rui replied, “At least not until they spring up and eat you.”

“Have a little faith,” Amanda said with an admonishing look, “My voice hasn’t steered me wrong yet.”

“How kind of you to say.” The Voice was delighted. “What a change from our first meeting.”

“Yep. You proved yourself,” Amanda said, “You made the very short list of people I trust.”

“But not me,” Rui snapped, “Can’t you trust me when I tell you this is a bad idea?”

“Yes. I do trust you, Rui,” Amanda replied, “It would be a bad idea for you to do what I’m doing. But I’m a human. You could almost say this is my destiny.”

“Then let destiny await,” the Voice said, “Your destination is around the next corner.”

“Ah yes. Your GPS function is back to full power, I see.” Amanda chuckled.

The Voice sighed. “You’re hilarious.”

They rounded the corner and came to a golden clearing. Even in the dim light, the leaves that carpeted the white flagstones had a metallic sheen. The trees, bent and twisted into fantastic shapes, were like gilded giants, watching over the place with a serene eye. In the middle, thrust into the stone, was a sword made of simple steel with its scabbard resting beside it. Amanda raised an eyebrow. “What? No jewel-encrusted hilt? No gold filigree? No carefully-wrought design?”

“Of course not,” the Voice said, “It is a sword made for a warrior going into battle, not a showpiece to put on a mantle.”

That made sense. Amanda squared her shoulders. “Well, looks like it’s showtime.”

Rui gave out a cry that made Amanda pause. He fell to his knees. “I know this place now. I know what you intend to do.” He chuckled. “Amanda,” His voice trembled. “I don’t know what will happen when you do, but I know something bad will. That is the sword Excalibur. No one may draw it out. Please, I’ll help you save your brother. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Don’t listen to him,” the Voice ordered, “You’ve come far and you’re so close. Don’t you want the power to save your brother? What can he do? Spit acid? Who has been more help? Me and my followers or he and his sword?”

Despite herself, Amanda hesitated. But then, she stepped toward the sword. “You might be right, Rui,” she said, “Maybe something terrible will happen. But whatever it is, it can’t be worse than losing my brother.” She grabbed the Excalibur by the hilt and rested her hand there for a minute. It felt worn, not like something that had sat exposed to the elements for years unending, but something comfortable and often used, like her baseball glove back home. She smiled and lifted it out of the stone.

Rui’s eyes darted around. A soft wind blew through the trees as if they sighed, but he heard nothing else. To Amanda, though, the world had blown asunder. A new voice, older and sterner than the one she knew, shouted in her head words that echoed down through many years. “Cursed be the one who should pull this sword from the stone. Let every day be full of trials. Let everything turn to dust at his feet. His name shall live in infamy forever.”

“Yeah?” She gritted her teeth and tried to shut the new voice out. “Well I’m not a boy.”

Silence, beautiful, blessed silence, filled the clearing. Amanda fell to her knees and chuckled. She brushed a hand down the blade of the sword. It was beautiful, in a utilitarian way. It felt heavy in her hands, but balanced and the edge was sharper than a diamond cutter. She reached for the scabbard and buckled it onto her waist. With a little practice, she should be able to draw and sheathe Excalibur with ease. “See, Rui?” she said, “Everything’s fine.”

Rui cautiously stepped into the clearing. “I did expect something to happen right then. Dare I hope this is a good omen?”

“Hey, partner,” Amanda called to the Voice, “I got the sword. What now?” There was no reply. “Hello? Voice in my head? You there?”

“Oh, I am,” the Voice said. Rui yelped and drew his sword.

“Who’s there?” he demanded.

“I told you. I am,” the Voice replied. Amanda gasped. She heard him not with her mind but with her ears. The Voice laughed. “Now, you foolish boy, witness my rise.”

The ground behind Amanda cracked and exploded into a thousand fragments. She whirled, sword in hand. Where once it had sat embedded in the stone, a huge hole gaped like a massive wound. A fleshless hand tipped with razor-sharp claws grabbed the edge. “Zombie,” Amanda shouted, “Rui, behind me.”

“Wait,” the Voice shouted, “Wait a moment.” As she watched, pink flesh grew over the pale bones. White fur sprouted from the new skin, the same color as the bones now hidden beneath. Another claw gripped the edge and grew flesh, then a head, and a torso, and with one final push, a white-furred thing lay on the ground before her, panting.

Rui drew his sword and charged. The thing flung out a clawed hand and he flew backwards, skittering across the ground until he hit the base of a tree. Amanda brandished Excalibur. “Now, now,” the thing said, “Is that anyway to greet your old partner?”

Amanda hesitated. It was the Voice. “You’re really a fox.”

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t a metaphor.”

“No.”

“A zombie fox.”

“No.” The thing snarled and revealed a mouth chock-full of razor-sharp teeth. “I wasn’t dead. I was sealed away by that infernal sword! But you, you freed me.”

“Greeeeeat.” Amanda edged backwards. “Rui, you were right. This was a terrible idea. Let’s go.” Rui nodded in fervent agreement.

“Hold.” The ring of authority in the thing’s voice brought them both to a halt. “Amanda, our partnership is not yet ended. I promised you I would help you find your brother.”

“Yeah, that’s not looking like a great option anymore,” Amanda said, “Who even are you?”

The thing grinned. “I am Maen, the Exiled Prince of Avalon. With your help, I will regain the throne that is rightfully mine. Then, we will free your brother and send you both home. Nothing about that has changed. After all, I never go back on my word.”

Amanda took a step back. “I know you,” she said, “You were in the bedtime stories my dad told me and Mike. But you were, er, you weren’t whatever this is.”

“Times have changed me,” the White Fox replied, “But know that I am on your side. Accept my continued help, and you and your brother will be saved.”

Amanda thought about it. “Well, in for a dime, in for a dollar.” She sheathed Excalibur. “Right then, your Highness. Let’s go get you that kingdom.”

* * *

Mike adjusted his new disguise. More accurately, he fiddled with the engraved ring around his finger. Made from “Spell-Stone”, Rafe had called it, a device made for

keeping a spell active long after the caster had ceased concentrating on it. A glance in the mirror confirmed that it was working. He looked like one of those squat, ugly little things (Homunculi, Rafe called them) that did all the work in Meerax's library. Perfect. He took a deep breath and stepped into the hall. Showtime.

The "worker's entrance" to the library was in the back. First obstacle was the 'Scanner', a specialized homunculus who specialized in detecting magic spells on people. He sat near the door, watching each worker who went inside. Mike stood in line and tried to hide his nervousness. Stick to the plan. Trust the plan.

Soon, it was his turn to stand before the Scanner. Hands at the sides, look straight ahead, don't speak. They wanted to keep anyone from casting spells, Rafe had explained. Of course, the Scanner detected the illusion on him and frowned. "Sorry." Mike slipped his hand into his pocket and activated the second Spell Stone. Then, he slid the ring off his finger and handed it over.

This second illusion was much uglier than the first, though not quite to the point of being deformed. The Scanner examined the first crystal and smirked. "Trying to put on a good face for the ladies, eh shrub?"

Mike shrugged. "Eh, you know how it is. They like 'em pretty."

The Scanner nodded and clucked his tongue. "Indeed they do. But you won't need it in there." He slipped the ring into his desk and tore a piece of paper out of a notebook. "Here, hand this slip in at the end of the night shift to reclaim your property."

Mike saluted jauntily. "You got it, boss." He stepped through the door before the Scanner had a chance to see his second illusion.

The library was as impressive as before and eerily quiet. Mike refused to be intimidated. He walked straight ahead, a spring in his step and purpose in his stride. He resisted the urge to whistle. That would draw too much attention. He wanted to look confident, not silly.

Second Obstacle: Meerax. She was, as before, lounging in front of the secret section of the library. A book, a tiny thing in her claws, lay open before her. He glanced at the title. *The Lonely Heiress*. Oh, okay then. A dragon who liked trashy romance novels. Wonders never cease.

He couldn't sneak past her because that would be suspicious. He couldn't skirt around her either. He had to get her away from the door.

Here came the tricky part, and the part Mike wasn't sure he could do. He needed to create a distraction. And there was only one thing he could think of that would draw everyone's attention in a library: a very loud, very large, very obnoxious sound. Like an explosion.

Heart hammering in his chest, he went to the far corner of the library and busied himself dusting off volumes until he was alone. He peeked around the corner. No one. He gulped and shut his eyes.

"Alright, Mike," he said to himself, "You don't have your violin. This'll be difficult. All you need is one little burst of magic." He put his hand out and concentrated. Imagine the music. Concentrate on it. Now a single note. Now, explode.

A single beam of light lanced from his fingers and slammed into a shelf against the opposite wall with a very satisfying boom. Mike winced as shreds of books flew everywhere. Ah well, it was the herbalism section. No great loss, right?

Meerax's roar of rage shook the air. "What was that? Who dares disturb my library? Find them! Bring them! Burn them!"

Mike gulped and slipped away along the wall. Another cry of rage rent the air when she saw the damage. Well, he'd distracted her. When had this been a good idea again?

Third obstacle, the book itself. It was held shut by an enchanted clasp. One of the king's greatest fears had been that the cultists would get their hands on it, so he'd made sure that only those with good hearts would open it. Mike hadn't thought that would be a problem, but when he went to pull it open, it remained stubbornly closed.

"You got this," he muttered, "Uh, hey. I kind of need to read you." The book, to no one's surprise, didn't answer. "Come on," Mike cajoled, "I need to find my sister. You're the only way I know of locating her." The book remained closed. "A good reason, huh?" Mike chuckled. "Alright, try this then."

He searched his heart, trying to find his purest intentions and lay them bare before the book. He didn't have much time. Meerax's rage was mounting. "I," he said, "do not know what my sister is up to. I know that, if I could, I'd save this world if it needed saving. But I don't know about her. I'm worried. Also, I want to prove to the king that I am not evil. And, I want to prove Rafe right. About me, and about himself. I want to help."

The book opened. There were words on the page, but they swam and arranged themselves in random, meaningless orders. Rafe had told him how it worked. It wasn't like reading a regular book. He'd need to 'immerse' himself in it. He braced himself and put his hands on it. The words leapt up and swirled around him. He felt a presence, not

like a person but more like a machine, prompt him to ask what was on his mind. He answered, what was Amanda doing right now? In reply, the words congealed into an image.

He saw Amanda, standing in a clearing under the moonlight. Her hand reached for a sword lodged in a stone pedestal. Mike thought of King Arthur and expected her to fail. He almost let go of the book when she pulled it out.

She seemed happy. But then, the ground exploded. Mike raised an arm to shield himself and the vision faded. Determined, he slammed his hands back on the page. A white creature who looked like a taller, lankier, twisted version of Rafe and the king stood with Amanda now. He spoke to her and she lowered her sword.

Mike wanted to scream for her to run. Instead, she left arm-in-arm with him. Kingstomb Island. He didn't know where that information came from, but he knew they were on Kingstomb Island.

He let go of the book with a gasp and stumbled backwards. "The White Fox," he said. And he ran.

As soon as Mike was out of the library, he let out a scream and punched the smooth marble wall. That hurt too much, so he didn't do it twice. Rafe waited back in his room, sitting on a impromptu bed of cushions. When Mike stepped inside, he bounced to his feet. "So," he said, tail zipping back and forth, "Tell me what you found. Did you get in?"

"Oh, I got in," Mike said with a dark chuckle, "I think Amanda freed the White Fox."

* * *

He had a fleet.

Of course he had a fleet! He had a cult, why wouldn't he have a fleet? But these ships flew above the land as well as water. And as soon as they'd strode out onto the beach, Rui slung unconscious across Maen's shoulders, the whole darn mass of ships sailed out of the storm and flew up over the beach.

Things had moved quickly after that. The Royal Guard outpost had surrendered. Outnumbered at least a hundred to one, they stood no chance at battle. All were taken prisoner except the Sergeant and a few of the guards, who joined the crew of one ship.

However, 'Maen', as he now called himself, was very displeased. "The goblins didn't come," he snarled, "Traitors."

Amanda glanced sideways at him. "You mean the things that attacked the ship I was on. They are on our side."

"They should be."

"Then why the blazes did they attack my ship?" Amanda snapped.

Maen turned his fiery gaze upon her. "Clearly, dear partner, they haven't remembered their oaths to me." He gestured to his fleet. "Behold, the rebuilt army. The faithful. Many of them supported my original rebellion, seven years ago. When the King defeated us, they scattered. The goblins retreated to their home on the fifth island, Skullbane. Now, they have refused my call." His eyes narrowed and his brow knit in thought. "I think I'll send you to, ahem, remind them of their promise."

She'd protested, but in the end he'd convinced her. The goblins had a huge population on their tiny island. If they were to overwhelm the King of Avalon, they needed their numbers. Mike's life, once again, dangled in front of her suspended by a tenuous thread of hope. And so, she found herself one day later standing on the deck of a small "caravel" drawing close to Skullbane Island.

Rui, disarmed and watched by two cultists, stood behind her with a grim expression on his face. He tugged at the new collar around his neck. A magic thing, Amanda knew, that compelled him to obey whatever orders she gave. A "gift" from Maen, made by the vampires who hid below the decks of several dark ships and reserved for those they wanted to keep as trophies or servants. Looking at it made Amanda feel a little sick.

A few more days, she told herself grimly, once Mike is safe, we can leave all of this behind us.

The goblin home-island jutted out of the sea like a rotten tooth. Blasted rocks and cawing, wheeling birds with bloodshot eyes watched her with malice. A fortress, ruined and mostly caved in, sat a little ways up the slope surrounded by hovels in precarious danger of collapse. The sound of a riot or a party, she couldn't tell which, came from the ruined fortress.

She shuddered and turned to go below decks. "Call me when we've reached our destination," she commanded.

"By your will, my lady."

They were all like that. Deferential, polite, scared even, but there was no warmth in them. Their eyes were distant and crafty. She hated them all. She went to her cabin and

slammed the door. Think of Mike. Hold his face in your mind. Remember why you're doing this and don't falter.

A knock came at the door. "I want to be left alone," she snapped.

"Is that an order?" Rui answered with more acid than was in his spit.

She hesitated. Sending him away would be easy, the collar made sure of that, but she loathed to do it. What Maen had done to him was cruel. She didn't wish to abuse it.

"Do as you like," she said.

The door opened. He stepped inside. "So," he said lightly, "I suppose I'll be going home with you then."

Amanda blinked. "There's no need for that. I won't force you."

He laughed. "Oh, but I insist," he said.

"But Rui." Amanda felt alarm growing in her chest. "You don't know what earth is like. A world full of humans is no place for the Feyfolken. You can't."

Rui tugged at his collar. His eyes burned. "Neither will Avalon," he said, "Not after Maen is done with it."

Amanda's eyes hardened. "I did what I had to do."

"Oh, didn't you."

"Anyone would have done the same."

"Yes. You must be right. After all, you're so wise."

She glared. "You're mocking me."

He put a paw to his chest. "I would never." He strode closer. "But I wonder if you're talking to me, trying to convince me, or to yourself."

Amanda scoffed. "I know what I'm doing."

Silence fell between them. Rui scratched the fur under his collar. “You know,” he said, “When I was small, I lived with a priest. He taught me that everyone has some good in them. Later, I struggled to believe him, but he was right. Even Captain Gale was kind at times. Everyone can choose to do what is right. Even you.”

He grabbed her hand. “Amanda, there’s still time. The attack hasn’t begun yet. If you decide to, you can put a stop to all this.” He looked deep into her eyes. “I know that a part of you knows what you’re doing is wrong. Listen to that part. Listen to me. Please, for the good of my whole world.”

Amanda felt heat rise in her cheeks. “How is what I’m doing wrong?” she said coldly, “Family is the most sacred bond we have. I must save my brother, Rui.”

“Even if you doom everyone else.”

Amanda crossed her arms. “What do you suggest? Run to the King? Beg his forgiveness? Or do you want me to fight this whole army myself?”

Rui ducked his head. “That I do not know.”

“Oh wow. How helpful.” Amanda’s tongue was like a burning lash. “You come here, tell me I’m in the wrong, and then you don’t even have an idea what’s right. Well the world isn’t always a pleasant place. We’ve got to do some unsavory things to move ahead, to protect what’s important.”

“I don’t believe that,” Rui said, “Evil only makes more evil. You can’t fix one with another like it.”

He dared call her evil? Cold rage filled her. A cruel thought came to her mind. Her mouth curled in a sardonic smile. “You wouldn’t even understand,” she said, “You’ve never had a family.” Rui stiffened. “Oh Rui, how could I have been so blind. It’s

no use arguing with you when you've never felt the love of a mother or father or even a brother. It's the most wonderful thing. If you had, you would understand why I have to do all this."

A strangled sound came from Rui's mouth. Tears welled in his eyes. Amanda felt a stab in her heart. He turned to go. "Wait," she ordered. The collar around his neck flared to life and he halted. "Rui, that was...I didn't..." She trailed off, looking at him sadly. Words, once said, can't be taken back.

"I see I'm wasting my time," Rui said, voice trembling.

"Rui."

He drew himself up and turned to face her. "Say what you want. Do what you want. I don't care. I'll pay for my caution and for my curiosity for the rest of my life." He smiled bitterly. "I wanted to give you a chance. I wanted to see what you would do. And now I have my answer." He held up a paw, stopping her protests. "I ask," he said, "That you take me with you. Whatever you do, it can't be worse than what your friend plans for this world."

Amanda's guilt drowned in a rising tide of anger. "Then I command you to be silent." Rui's collar glowed. "I command you to kneel. I command you to never speak against me ever again. What do you know of it? Nothing. This is all your fault anyway. Or at least your people's. If not for your law, I wouldn't have needed to do this. You brought this upon yourselves. I am doing what's right by me and mine."

Rui gave no reply.

She turned away, disgusted, though with him or with herself she couldn't tell. "Leave," she ordered, "And get ready to go ashore."

* * *

Amanda turned to the crew of her ship. She hadn't bothered to learn their names. "Come on," she said, "Let's get this over with." She beckoned for Rui to follow her. She knew he didn't like her, but couldn't bring herself to leave him with the cultists either. Stiffly, he fell in with four guards armed with cruel weapons. The standard of the White Fox flapped above them, held by one of the sailors. Their small company landed and advanced up the slope.

There were no guards. Whatever was going on inside had drawn all the goblins to it. That at least was a blessing. They would enter unopposed. The rabble and riot inside would normally be enough of a discouragement. But Amanda had a task and she meant to do it, regardless of the consequences. For Mike.

A great crowd of goblins chattered and fought and bit and sang and flew and covered the walls, floor and crumbling balconies. But as the small company entered, the noise died. The goblins turned to see who dared enter their stronghold. Their eyes glittered and they fell back when they saw the standard.

Amanda gulped. Well, before they decided to turn all those weapons on her, time to take charge of the situation. She cleared her throat and shouted. "Lord Maen, fallen prince of Avalon, summons you to join his armies and fulfill your oaths."

The goblins chattered and glared hungrily at her. Whispers went up and down their ranks. They edged closer. She drew Excalibur. "What you mean, 'summoned'? We no lissen to little girl. We no lissen to anyone." a voice called from the back.

“Who said that?” one of the guards demanded, furious.

The crowd split down the middle and a goblin decked out in gold jewelry strode forward. A massive bandage sat between his eyes. Amanda suppressed a laugh. “Well, well, look who it is. How’s the face holding up, sport?”

The goblin glared. “I’s remember you.”

“Mutual, buddy.” Amanda brandished Excalibur. “How do you like my new weapon? Shiny, am I right?”

The goblin scoffed and drew a dagger. All the others followed suit. They jeered and grinned and danced. Their leader puffed out his chest. “If da ‘fallen prince’ don’t show up hisself, then we no follow him,” he declared, “Goblins no do what no one says. Goblins loot! Goblins plunder! Goblins kill!”

With a roar, the goblins charged. Amanda felt her heart give way. There wasn’t a crew here to fight on her behalf. She had only four guards, a sailor, and Rui. Her feet wouldn’t move. Her arms were heavy. The goblins bore down. A sword thrust toward her abdomen. She closed her eyes and threw herself to the side.

No pain tore her body. No horrible blade pierced her. Amanda’s eyes snapped open and she took everything in at once. The goblins moved sluggishly. She could see at a glance where all their attacks would fall. She rolled away, evading them. A chuckle escaped her throat. “Oh,” she said, “Oh.” A grin spread across her face. “This is nice.”

She leapt to her feet. A spear lashed out past her head. She drove a fist into the offender’s nose. Thrust, thrust, dodge. They missed. They couldn’t touch her. She moved like a dancer. The goblins stumbled over themselves trying to catch her.

Her eyes met the leader and she grinned. Duck, dodge, weave, fake-out, she pushed past the goblins between them. One got in her way, mouth wide and leering at her. Excalibur lashed out and stained the ground with its blood. Amanda felt her heart shudder, but rage, born of all the frustration and helplessness that she had felt all these days, overwhelmed her. She didn't know how, but she found herself pressing a sword to the chieftain's throat.

She heard Rui cry out. She glanced behind her. It seemed that the rest of her escort hadn't been so skilled as she was. The goblins had them, watching her and holding swords to their throats. She turned back to her captive. "Release them."

He leered at her.

Amanda clucked her tongue. "Not the answer I'm looking for." She dug Excalibur against his throat. "Let them go or I'll take your head off." She would do it too. When had she become so cold? "If you let them go, I'll let you go."

The goblin's eyes narrowed, He studied her. "Let 'em go," he spat. The goblins obeyed and released the cultists and Rui. Amanda let the leader up.

"Now," she said with a smile, "About your service to Maen."

The goblin spat. "We no lissen to no one."

"You will 'lissen' to me." Amanda's voice was cold, imperious. Not her own voice. This was the voice of someone hard and heartless. "I can still remove your head with a single stroke.

"No."

Amanda grinned, but it was that of a wolf. "In that case," she said, "I challenge you."

He looked up sharply. “What?”

“I challenge you,” Amanda said again, “If I win, I take your head, appoint a new leader, and you lot march down to your ships and get ready for war. If you win, you take my head and continue whatever...” She gestured to the incredible mess that littered the courtyard. “This miserable place is.”

The goblin’s eyes flickered, a little fear entering them.

“Well?” Amanda swished Excalibur back and forth.

The goblin hesitated, but after a long time he nodded once more. “We fight,” he spat, “We fight. Tell da prince that we fight for ‘im.”

Amanda sheathed Excalibur and nodded, satisfied. “Thank you,” she said, “for your cooperation.”

The goblins began shouting once more, but this was different. This was the chatter of business, getting ready for a great battle. Amanda turned and moved for the exit. “Come,” she ordered, voice still that hard, evil one of someone else, “We must leave now.”

Rui watched her with a distant, cool expression. And for the first time in a long time, though she didn’t quite understand why, she felt the hot heat of shame.

* * *

The King’s cake tasted delicious. It had a smooth creaminess to it that washed over the tastebuds and massaged them with tender kindness. But even that tasted like ash in Mike’s mouth. Amanda a villain. It was unthinkable. It went against everything he’d

ever read. Well, except Narnia. But Edmund had been tricked. Yes. That had to be it. Amanda had to have been tricked. Yet, she wasn't greedy. Why had she agreed to help the White Fox?

"What do you think?" The King leaned forward, an eager smile on his face.

"Hmm?" Mike looked up. "Oh yes. It's great. Absolutely fantastic."

The king nodded, pleased. "And Rafe? You haven't touched yours."

"I'm not hungry," the prince replied.

The king's face fell. "Oh dear. If this is about confining you to the castle..."

"No," Rafe snapped. "I mean, no, no it's not. Father, I'm sorry." He swallowed. "I made a mistake."

Mike heard alarm bells ringing in his head.

The king blinked. "Go on," he urged.

"There's a human in Avalon," Rafe said.

The King did not even twitch. "And you know this how?"

"She's on King's Island," Rafe said, "We read the Book of Records. She arrived a few days ago."

King Starchaser paled and stumbled backwards. "No, that is not possible. There cannot be two at once." He swallowed. "It is too late. She released him, didn't she? She released the White Fox."

"Yes," Mike chimed in, "Yes she did." He rose from his chair and bowed. "Your majesty, I..."

The door flew open. Inquisitor Selby, out of breath and looking very ragged with mud and leaves stuck in his cloak, stumbled into the room. "My King," he called, "I have

horrible news. Prince Rafe has been..." His eyes fell on Rafe and he blanched. "Has been kidnapped by a Fanfasm. How are you here?"

Rafe pointed to Mike. "He rescued me."

Selby stalked over towards Mike. The boy fidgeted under his piercing gaze. The Inquisitor held out a hand. "Then, I must offer my congratulations. Again." Mike hesitated, but accepted it. "And I fear it is my duty to inform you, my lord, that this boy before you is also a human. Michael Watters."

"That much I knew, though I hoped I was wrong. For my son's sake." King Starchaser growled. He waved his hand and the room went dark. All light vanished except for a red glow that surrounded the king. Blue flames poured from under his cloak, swirling around him like innumerable tails. He reached out a hand and a scepter of heat and light coalesced in his grip.

"You knew?" Mike's voice was barely a squeak.

"Of course I knew. Did you think I would not read the Book of Records when I received word my son had been kidnapped? Do you take me for a fool? Perhaps I am. I was so focused on you that I missed your sister entirely." he said, his voice now two octaves deeper and strong enough to shake the ground. "Speak, why have you come? Do you seek to assassinate me? I, who am the master of flame and smoke, light and darkness? Your guile has failed. You never had a chance to take me by surprise."

Mike stepped back, but Selby appeared behind him and caught his shoulders.

"No, your majesty," the Inquisitor shouted. "Do not be so quick to judge."

The king reared back. “Am I to believe my ears? Is my own grand Inquisitor, tasked with protecting our land from the human threat, defending one of those cursed creatures? Beings who are nothing but evil?”

“I’m not,” Mike protested, “I don’t want to hurt anyone. Well, I’d like to punch Selby here a few times and sometimes Rafe could use a smack upside the head, but those are personal matters.”

“Then answer this,” the king said, “Why have you come?”

“To read the Book of Records,” Mike said, “To find my sister and to save her. But she’s been tricked, I’m sure of it. She’d never willingly help someone destroy the world, any world. She’s a good person.” He took a step forward. “If you read about me in that book, you have to know this is true!”

The king scoffed. “All I know is that you are a very convincing liar. You deceived Rafe and used him to get close to me, but your doom was sealed the second you stepped inside this palace. What do humans know of ‘good’?”

“Father,” Rafe protested.

“And Rafe, I thought better of you. I would not have believed it even though the Book of Records swore it was true had I not seen it with my own eyes. I had hoped that you really had escaped and that ‘Matthew’ here was who he said he was. But I did not let that hope blind me. And neither should you. Helping a human, Rafe? Do you hate me that much?”

Mike’s hackles rose. If he was going to die, it wasn’t going to be begging for mercy. “Look at it like this,” he said, “The White Fox is back. I don’t know what that

means, but I do know that I am not with him. My sister is. Why, I don't know. But I intend to find her, smack her upside the head, and talk some sense into her."

"She now wields Excalibur," Rafe added, "Which, need I remind you, makes the wielder undefeatable in battle. If she is with the White Fox, then we're all doomed."

Well that was bleak. "Yes," Mike agreed, "But I can bring her to her senses."

"And why should we trust you?" the king hissed, "I'd say that with one less human, the world is that much safer. If you flee and join their side, then even if your sister falls you can take up Excalibur and continue to fight against us."

"My king," Selby said, "I can attest to Mike's heroism. Since he has arrived, he has done nothing but help and safeguard the citizens of the kingdom against the cultists. He is not our enemy."

"A good deed may be done for selfish reasons," the king said with glowering menace.

"I won't join them," Mike protested, "You think I want this world to be destroyed? No. This place is awesome. You have magic and dragons and witches and all the things I never got to see back home. This place is exciting, it's alive. I don't want to see it die. I want to stay and have adventures with Rafe and learn magic and all sorts of stuff."

"Father," Rafe said, "Mike is not the problem here. His sister is" He fell to his knees. "My advice is to let us go. We will travel to their camp, sneak in, and find his sister. If Mike succeeds, we can return with the wielder of Excalibur on our side. If he fails, then we are no more doomed than before. Please, consider it."

“Even if I agreed to the plan in principle,” the king said, “I will not send you into danger, my son.” His flames faded and light returned to the room. “With your mother dead, you’re too precious to me.”

Rafe stiffened. “Then, father, I must once again ask your forgiveness.”

The king’s fire flared back to life, prepared for an attack from Rafe. Mike, however, made the first move. He kicked Selby in the knee. There was a very satisfying crunch and scream from the shadow-man. “Sorry,” Mike shouted and dashed for the door. The king whirled and sent a blast of blue flame towards the boy, but Rafe’s red caught it and ate the oxygen in the air in its path. Both blue and red fizzled out.

“Run,” Mike said. He and Rafe bolted. The king didn’t pursue them.

“Guards,” he called, “Attend me.”

“Well, I’m not dead,” Mike said brightly, “I guess I have you to thank for that.”

“It didn’t go according to plan,” Rafe admitted.

“Speaking of plans, we need one.”

“Back to the Underground.”

“Right. The Underground. And how are we going to get there?”

“Well,” Rafe smirked. “I thought we’d start by running.”

* * *

“Halt,” the gate-guard ordered. He blinked. “Prince Rafe?”

“In the fur. Hold the gate open please. Thank you. Bye.” Mike and Rafe sped out of the palace gate and into the city. The traffic stopped, glanced their way, and continued about its business, amused expressions on their faces.

“Another escape, prince Rafe?” one of the finely dressed ladies called.

“Off on another adventure?”

“Does the king know you’re gone yet?”

“Watch out for trouble.”

“Good luck.”

They paid Mike no attention.

Mike was beginning to feel the exertion. The dull throb in his stomach had faded miraculously fast, but chose this moment to make a roaring comeback. He sucked in huge gasps of air and forced his legs to pound the flagstones. “Rafe, I think we need to slow...” He stumbled and almost lost his balance. Rafe whirled and caught him.

“Halt in the name of the king.” A troop of guards emerged from the gate and began forcing their way toward.

Rafe hauled Mike to his feet. “No time. Come on.”

A system of aqueducts ran throughout the city, carrying water to houses and shops no matter where they lay. Rafe half-led half-dragged Mike up the stairs. The guards were right behind. “Jump,” he ordered and Mike jumped right into the raging current.

It was like the world’s longest, fastest waterslide, one that branched off in a hundred different directions. Mike seized hold of Rafe’s tail. Otherwise, he would have been swept away and ended up who-knows-where. Instead, they landed by the main gate.

“Prince Rafe?” the sergeant in command exclaimed.

A chill wind blew and Mike shivered. Rafe's flames soared up and dried his fur. Mike repressed a giggle. He looked so fluffy. "Out of the way," his royal fluffiness Rafe ordered. The guards hesitated, but obeyed. Rafe hauled Mike out of the city and toward the Underground Station. Only when they were back aboard and headed away from New Camelot did he relax. Then, he dried Mike off too.

Mike didn't talk. He stared out the window at the tunnel wall. How could Amanda have been tricked? Nothing about the White Fox or his followers indicated "good and helpful people here". He let out a heavy sigh.

"We'll find her," Rafe said.

Mike smiled weakly. "Thanks."

The door opened. Mike jumped to his feet. "Selby," he said.

"Don't be alarmed," the shadowlord said, "I am not here to arrest you. I am here to help you."

"But the king..."

"I serve the best interests of Avalon and its people," Selby said harshly, "If King Starchaser's personal feelings get in the way of seeing what's best, then I will not stand idly by out of foolish loyalty when I could help ensure that the one chance we have of defeating a real threat runs off with only a scatter-brained prince to guide him."

Mike shifted awkwardly. "Uh, thanks, I guess."

A tight smile appeared on Selby's face. "You're welcome. Though be warned, I will be standing right behind you. If you betray us, no amount of luck or speed will save you from my blade this time."

“Right.” Mike nodded. How was he supposed to respond to that? “I, uh, hadn’t planned on it.”

“Good.” Selby plopped down beside them. “Onwards and upwards then.”

* * *

Amanda’s mood was as black as a midnight eclipse in a coal mine. She threw the door open and stormed inside Maen’s grand cabin. “Well that was fun,” she said with false cheer, “Next time you want me to wrestle a goblin, give me some air freshener for afterwards.”

The room was dark, though cracks of sunlight shone in through the poorly-curtained windows. Soft pillows and carpets lay around the room in piles and a sickly-sweet smell filled the room. Maen lay on a window-seat in the very back of the room, staring out through the ragged curtain. Despite herself, Amanda’s hand gripped the hilt of Excalibur. She cleared her throat impatiently.

Maen chuckled. “Welcome back. I see you enjoyed yourself.” He uncoiled from his resting place and stretched both arms above his head. His spine cracked and popped like a bundle of dry sticks. He flashed her that grin again, the one filled with too many teeth. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Oh yeah, beating goblin heads into the ground. Lots of fun.” She scoffed. “You know, I think I figured out what they smell like. A sewer.”

“Then I will tell Keebly to take a bath before this evening. We would not want your, mm, sensibilities to be offended.”

Amanda eyed him. “Why? What’s this evening?”

“A feast. A grand feast,” Maen replied, “To celebrate the unification of our alliance against my father. Speaking of which.” He bounded to his feet and rummaged through the piles of fabric in the corner. “I got you something. Consider it a little gift.”

“Great.” Amanda glanced longingly back at the door. “But you shouldn’t have. Really.”

“Nonsense. Nothing is too good for my ‘dear partner’, now is it?”

Amanda’s hand formed into a fist. “Not quite what I meant.”

Maen wasn’t paying attention. “Let’s see.” He tossed things aside with reckless abandon. “Here it is.” He seized an item from the pile and drew it out. He held it up to the light with a proud smile that quelled the feverish glint in his eyes. “Well? What do you think?”

“Oh. A dress.” Amanda thought it was the most pretentious thing she’d ever seen. Impossibly large and radiant jewels shone even in the dim light, stitched or even melded into the fabric by some unknown means. Gold thread held the seams together and fine lace surrounded the neck. “Well, it’s very pretty.”

“I want you to wear it tonight,” Maen said, “And I want you to sit by my side at dinner tonight.”

Amanda blinked several times. “What the heck. Are you asking me out?”

“I believe that’s what your kind calls it, yes.” He set the dress down and strode back to the window. “During my visit to your world, several of the people I met talked of ‘going out’. At first I was confused about why they made such a great deal of stepping outside, but I learned the greater significance of the term.” He chuckled. “Besides, don’t

you think I qualify as a fairy-tale prince? Or do I need a cape and perfectly combed hair?”

He smiled so happily. Even his tail almost wagged. Amanda took the dress but didn't see it. Her vision clouded and became blurry. She looked down and her fists trembled.

“May I take your reaction as a yes?” Maen asked, hope dripping from his voice. Amanda ground her teeth into a grimacing smile.

“And what about Mike who is, at this very moment, ‘sitting inside a dungeon being tortured’, if I remember correctly?” she said, “Aren't we supposed to be rescuing him now that we have your army?”

“Soon, soon,” Maen assured her, “But there are formalities to observe first. I do hope you will accept. It will show them all that we stand united in this rebellion. And, well, I don't believe I need to tell you how...”

“Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Amanda screamed. He fell silent. With a fluid motion, she drew Excalibur. Maen's eyes widened and he recoiled.

“Amanda?”

With a single, swift strike, she tore the dress in two and tossed the halves to the ground. She leveled the sword in Maen's direction. “Listen up. I didn't help you, I didn't join your rebellion to play dress up and go to the prom and giggle like a cheerleader while my brother rots in some God-forsaken dungeon. I helped you because you said we would save him. That is all I care about. And that is all I am going to do. Do. You. Understand. Me. Your. Highness?”

Maen's face clouded with anger. "You...you..." Sickly green flame burst to life in his eyes. "How dare you. Do you even understand what that was?"

"Read my lips, 'partner'," Amanda snapped, "I. Don't. Care. Once I leave this world, our business is done. I will go back to my life and never think about this place ever again. You will have a kingdom to rule. Neither of us has any reason to care."

"I do," Maen shouted. He turned back to the window. "Allow me to confess something. Since we met, I've been remembering feelings that I thought I'd forgotten. Sensations and thoughts that I hadn't experienced for years. I, you, our partnership." He took a deep breath. "You helped me more than anyone ever has. You're more than another cultist or a follower. You freed me."

"Oh this is not *happening*," Amanda said with a groan, "Look, I do not like you. You gave some good advice. You were very helpful. But what I want is to save my brother. That is it." She turned for the door. "Enjoy your 'party'. Call me when you're ready to start the rescue."

Maen's voice turned cold. "If that is what you wish."

Amanda slammed the door behind her and let that be her answer.

She needed to get away. Away from these cultists and the preparations for war. Away from the "hail, the Champion," and "My lady" and all the other insipid comments that eroded her confidence. The deck was out of the question. But she couldn't go to her cabin. Rui would be there. Downwards. That was the only place left.

So she went downwards. She wandered from hall to hall, seeking someplace quiet. To her dismay, she found a cellblock full of the Royal Guard instead. "Sorry," she stammered. Her eyes fell on a familiar figure behind the bars. "Elder Tomas?"

“Amanda,” he said, a warm smile on his face, “I am glad to see you alive. I feared that you had perished or met some worse fate.”

“Oh.” Her face paled. “Yes, well, I’m fine. It’s good to see you again.” This was very awkward.

The jailer laughed. “Old fool,” he mocked, “That girl is the Champion of the White Fox. It is thanks to her that our master is free.”

Elder Tomas’ eyes fell on Excalibur. “Oh dear child,” he said, “What have you done?”

Great. Another lecture. She’d had enough from Rui. “I’m saving my brother,” she explained patiently. Did none of these people get it?

There was a look in Elder Tomas’s eyes. It was not anger. It was not condemnation. It was sadness. “I see,” he said. He pitied her. Why? He was in the much more pitiable position. “You’re human?”

“Right on the first guess, old man.” The jailer laughed.

Elder Tomas bowed his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. Amanda’s heart leapt to her throat. “You were driven to this. It is not entirely your fault.”

Relief flooded Amanda. “You understand,” she said.

“But,” he continued, “Your actions will cause great pain to many, many families. You have set in motion events which, if they continue as they currently are, I do not believe even you will like the outcome.”

Amanda stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“The cycle will remain unbroken,” Tomas said, “Those you have wronged will seek vengeance. And then your children will hurt them. And so on unto eternity.”

Amanda shook her head. “No,” she said, “No, I thought you understood.”

“I do,” Tomas said, “It is a natural impulse. I understand. But I am very disappointed.”

“You don’t even know me. And yet you judge me?”

“I have known many like you,” he said, “And they never came to a happy end.”

Amanda turned on her heel and left. She couldn’t afford this kind of thinking. She had to stay strong. A few more days. Everything was falling apart. She was falling apart. A few more days and she would be done.

* * *

“I don’t know how fast the word will spread,” Rafe said, “The King, if wishes, can send a message to everyone in the land. He hasn’t yet, or I would have heard it.”

Mike looked at him, incredulous. “Everyone in the land. Just like that.”

“It’s called the Chamber of Dreams,” Selby said, “that’s where he’d have to do it.”

“Alright then.” Mike said, “Then he might be trying to keep this quiet.” He shrugged. “I mean, if word that a human was here got out, much less two humans, it might start a mass-panic. No one wants that. Panic is bad.”

“A recipe for disaster,” Selby mused, “And besides, he now has a war to make preparations for.”

Rafe's expression was grim. "But that doesn't mean the guards at the port won't be watching for us. He has other lines of communication. I suggest we don't enter the city and head straight down to the port."

"Can we do that?" Mike hadn't heard of any city designed like that, where the port was kept separate and you could avoid the city altogether. Normally, the city kind of enveloped the port.

"Hire a fisherman. Avoid the city gates." Selby nodded. "It is a tactic the Royal Inquisitors often employ when we need to enter an area discretely."

Mike shrugged. That made good sense. And that is what they did. An old, grizzled man took them in his small boat up to the dock. Rafe thanked him, flipped him several coins, and they were on their way. Simple as that. Perhaps Selby's presence, menacing as always, dissuaded any questions. Maybe it was Rafe's charming personality. Or Mike's dashing looks. He wasn't going to complain.

Now, however, they needed a ship: one that would take them to King's Island and Amanda. They also needed to avoid the guards, so things had to be done quietly. Which meant going back to the old man and asking him a few questions.

"Do you know of any ships around here that would travel to King's Island?" Mike asked.

The old man grinned. "Aye. Last week, Captain Gale's ship made a trip out there for a pretty penny. Made quite the exit too, sailing like the Devil himself was after them."

"Excellent," Mike said, "Now, which ship is hers."

The old man pointed. "That one there. Named the *Venture* she is."

And so, Mike and Rafe soon found themselves on the deck in the same place Amanda had stood not too long ago. They called for the captain and soon she came. However, Captain Gale took one look at them and turned right around.

“No,” she said.

“No?” Rafe repeated, “But we haven’t even asked you to do anything yet.”

She pointed to Mike. “Human, right?” He shook his head. “Oh don’t give me that. You’re the spitting image of that girl. And no, I know what you want. And the answer is no. I’m not getting in any deeper. You can shove off and find another ship.”

“You took Amanda to King’s Island?” Mike asked.

“Correct,” Gale growled, “Stole my cabin boy and I didn’t get the gold I was promised when I returned.”

“Then it’s your responsibility to take us so we can correct the mistake she made,” Mike said.

Gale laughed. “Listen here, kid. I don’t take responsibility. At least none that I don’t give myself. And I’m taking a hard pass on this one. Too much danger, not enough profit.”

“If you don’t,” Rafe countered, “Then the world as we know it will be over.”

Captain Gale’s eyes narrowed. “How so?”

“She stole Excalibur and freed the White Fox,” Rafe said, “We are, for reasons we don’t wish to explain, the last hope of stopping her and the invasion.”

Selby strode forward. “Furthermore,” he said, gathering the shadows around him, “I’m making it your responsibility.”

Gale drew her sword. “Like scurvy you are.”

“If not for your actions,” Selby said coldly, “This situation would not have arisen.”

“I wasn’t about to turn down that kind of profit.”

“That’s your problem then,” Selby snapped, “Greed is no excuse for treachery.”

Gale rolled her eyes and looked to Rafe. “World’s about to end, huh?”

“So it seems,” he said.

Captain Gale cursed. The crew muttered to themselves in alarm. “Well, well,” Gale said with a furious grin on her face. “Looks like I went and stepped in it then. The entire world you say? Well, we can’t have that. And I don’t doubt she could do it too. There’s a fire in that one. Give her Excalibur and her enemies should quake in their boots.” She huffed. “All hands, prepare to embark.”

Mike bowed. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Oh stuff it, shorty.”

They didn’t get very far. A few hours out from port, when the land had already fallen far behind, a cry went up from the lookout. “Ships. Ships off the port bow.”

Captain Gale ran forward and scanned the horizon. “Where? Where are they?”

“Look up, Captain.”

Floating lazily through the sky was the greatest armada Mike had ever seen. They were ships, of a sort, but white and pale as the moon. They flew in formation, headed directly for Avalon. The invasion was already underway.

“Turn around,” Gale ordered, “Turn around, blast you and sink you. Back to the port.”

* * *

Amanda kicked open the door and stormed on deck. “How am I supposed to sleep with all this racket?” she demanded.

The crew of Maen’s skyship ignored her. They crowded over to one side, whooping and hollering. Three women dressed in rags danced around in a circle, chanting in some strange language. From the way they were going on, it was a wonder the whole ship didn’t flat out fall from the sky.

Maen sat on the rear deck, lounging on a luxurious chair. He laughed and raised a paw to her in salute. “How good of you to join us,” he called, “We missed your presence last night.”

Angry heat flooded her face. “Shut up. What’s going on up here?”

Maen raised an eyebrow. “Why, we’re striking the first blow of the war.” He rose and gestured to the ocean below. “Observe, the power of the White Fox. Ragged Sisters, you may fire when ready.”

Thunder rumbled and shook the deck. Amanda looked up. When had those dark clouds appeared?

* * *

“This does not look good,” Selby stated, “They are conjuring a storm. I can only guess that they intend to bombard us from range.”

Gale had her sword out and at the ready. “Faster you fools.”

“We’re pushing her as hard as we can,” the helmsman said, “Anymore and we’ll overstrain the drivespell.”

“These are our lives we’re talking about here,” Gale snapped, “Break the ship to bloody bits if you have to. Just get us out of here.”

“Aye Captain.”

“Captain Gale,” Selby called, “If you have any magical defenses, such as a barrier spell, now would be the time to activate them.”

She glowered at him. “But Inquisitor, you know as well as I do that sort of magic is restricted to Royal Navy ships only. As a civilian, I am not allowed to purchase one.”

“You seemed the sort to ignore the law when it suited your interests,” Selby said, “But I swear that if you do have them, using them now will not bring you under prosecution.”

Captain Gale looked down. “Those enchantments are very expensive, especially on the black market.”

“Ah. Now that seems more in line with your character.”

“Excuse me?”

A blinding bolt struck the ship dead-center. The deck rocked and tilted. Smoke billowed up from belowdecks. Mike thrust his head over the side. “We’re hit. Right above the waterline.”

“Perfect. Well this day can take a barrel of broken glass and choke on it.” Captain Gale shook her fist at the sky. “Leave off, will you? We’re leaving.” Another bolt zipped down and barely missed the stern. “Cowards! I’d tear your heads off if you came down here.”

* * *

Amanda stared down at the ship below. It was one of those normal ones, an Avalon ship. The vampires had figured out how to make theirs fly. Because of course they did. Why sit on a throne waiting for poor maidens to wander in and saying, ‘bwaa, ha, ha, I want to suck your blood,’ when you could be inventing flying ships?

The ship down below looked familiar. She glanced around and saw a goblin cackling and peering down with a spyglass. She strode over. “Give me that.” She snatched it from him. His face curled up in rage and he leapt for her. With a backstep and kick, she sent him over the railing. Served him right. Nasty creatures.

She focused on the ship. A third bolt of lightning tore through the mid-deck. Must have hit something important too because the ship stopped hovering and fell the last few feet into the water. She blinked. Captain Gale? It was the *Venture*. She chuckled. Throw her off, would they? Well, now they would get to sink.

The spyglass fell from her hands. It clattered on the edge and followed its former owner into the ocean. “Stop shooting,” she shouted. Her voice was lost in the din. “Stop shooting you idiots.” She ran to Maen. “Hey! Your royal furriness.”

He turned to her, a bemused expression on his face. “Yes, dear partner? Was there something you wanted?”

“Mike is on that ship, you idiot.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yes. With some miniature version of you.”

Maen's eyes widened. He raised a paw. "Stop the bombardment." The shouting and jeering died. The three witches stopped their chanting and dancing. Maen spread his arms wide. "Instead, prepare the boarders."

* * *

"Well, they stopped," Mike said brightly, "That's got to count for something."

Selby stared at the hovering fleet. "I have some good news and some bad news," he stated.

"I like good news." Mike hoped it was real good news.

"They no longer mean to kill us."

"Oh." Mike let out a sigh of relief. "That's not so bad."

"They intend to capture us instead."

"Ah."

Rafe's paws ignited. "They will not take us without a fight. We will hold them off until the end."

"And that would come very shortly." Selby sat down on the deck. "I recommend we surrender."

Mike blinked. Rafe's face colored. He puffed out his chest and put his hands on his hips. "I will not be taken without a fight. I am the Prince of Avalon."

Selby didn't reply directly. "Oh captain," he called, "How is the ship?"

Gale popped her head up from below. “Dead in the water and sinking,” she growled, “And nothing we can do about it here. Unless anyone here knows how to make it fly like one of those ones.”

“And how many of your crew are fit to fight?”

“You can’t be ser...” She looked into the inquisitor’s eyes and rethought her tact. “Fifteen, if that.”

Selby nodded. “Then, in your professional opinion, what is our best course of action?”

She hesitated, anger and fear colliding on her face. “If we want to live? Surrender.” She pointed up. “That fleet is at least twenty ships. More, if some are hiding in the clouds.”

“Excellent,” Selby said, “You see, Prince Rafe, the...”

“But,” Captain Gale growled, “They did the one unforgivable thing. They sunk my ship.” She drew her sword. “And so I’m going to go down fighting.”

“Oh by the King’s name, woman.” Selby buried his head in his hands.

“It’s alright, everyone,” Mike said, “We didn’t come here to fight. This could help us.” Rafe glanced sideways at him. “It’ll get us exactly where we want to be: right in front of Amanda.”

A light appeared in Rafe’s eyes. “Very well then.” He let his paws fall to his side and sat down. “Surrender it is.”

Gale laughed. “Surrender if you want. My crew and I will fight.” She turned and saw her crew also sitting, paws and hands on their heads. “What are you sorry lot doing?”

“Sorry, Captain,” one sailor said, “Dying is not high on our list of priorities.”

“This is where money fails you, Captain,” Selby said, “A loyal man will fight to the death. A mercenary will fight so long as he thinks he will enjoy his payment.”

Captain Gale’s face twisted in rage, but she sat down.

Selby leaned over to Mike. “Remember,” he whispered, “Do not betray us. If you do, nothing will save you from my blade.”

* * *

“Mike.” Amanda crushed Mike in a tremendous hug before he even had both feet on the flagship’s main deck. She swept him up and buried her head against his shoulder. “I can’t begin to say how happy I am to see you alive.”

Mike warily returned the embrace. “I’m happy to see you too, Amanda.”

She pulled back and sniffed. Mike saw her eyes were wet. “I wondered you know,” she said, “Wondered if I was doing the right thing. But you’re here now, safe, and we can go home.”

Mike glanced around. The deck was filled with Fanfasms, goblins, cultists, and figures wrapped head to toe in black robes. Vampires, perhaps. His eyes fell on the Ragged Sisters, who leered at him, and his heart fell. And to top it off, he felt Selby’s eyes on his back. “Amanda,” he said, “What have you done?”

“Well, well, well.” Mike turned and for the first time laid eyes on the White Fox in person.

He was shorter than he expected. Not that he wasn’t very tall, but his emaciated frame had seemed bigger in the Book of Records. He strode onto the deck, clothed in the

finest green robes, and bowed. “Little brother,” he said to Rafe, “It’s good to see you. I am glad you came to me, where you could be kept safely, instead of making me search you out in the middle of the ensuing battle.”

Rafe glared at him. “My brother is dead. You killed him. You’re the White Fox.”

Maen laughed. “Is that what father told you? Of course he did. You were young at the time. Yes, I disappeared. I went to explore the human world and see what had become of those great heroes I read about every night to put you to bed. The trip changed me. I came back with a new appearance and a new outlook.” He bowed. “Maen, at your service, fallen prince of Avalon and soon to be its new ruler. Also known as the White Fox, the Dread Spectre, and a host of other meaningless epithets.”

Amanda frowned. “Maen, this is your brother?”

“Indeed.” Maen took Rafe’s face in his claws and turned it toward Amanda.

“Allow me to introduce Prince Rafe. Can’t you see the family resemblance?”

Mike thought Maen’s face had a lot more teeth in it. Also, they were both foxes. They looked pretty similar. Amanda would have agreed, if they’d possessed telepathy. She smiled at Rafe. “In that case, thank you, Rafe, for rescuing my brother and bringing him here.”

Mike laughed. “It’s the other way around, Amanda. I’ve been rescuing him. Twice now. From these people.” He gestured towards the cultists. Amanda’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“But Mike, listen to me.”

“Amanda.” He took hold of her shoulders. “I don’t know why, but you’re on the wrong side. We’re supposed to be the heroes. You went and found the villains.”

Amanda's face colored. "Villains," she snapped, "Who decreed that all humans were supposed to die? The King. And who's done nothing but help me since I got here? Maen and his followers."

"Amanda, they are trying to take over the kingdom. They're the bad guys."

"Who's to say?" she said, "We don't know. The king seems pretty evil if he's having people executed because of racism. That's Hitler-style stuff."

Mike pointed to the crowd. "That is a goblin," he said, "That is a vampire. Those three are witches. They eat children. That is a Fanfasm, who are pretty big jerks if you ask me. And him." He leveled a finger at Maen. "Look at him. Claws, sharp fangs, emaciated body, and an evil grin. These are the bad guys, Amanda."

Maen chuckled.

"He even has an evil laugh," Mike snapped.

Amanda forced a grin onto her face. "We can discuss this later. When we're back home." She turned to Maen. "Anytime now, partner."

Maen bowed. "There is a Fey Road right outside of the port. Once we make landfall, that will be our first stop." He held up a claw. "However, one last issue."

Amanda's jaw tightened. "You better not be going back on our deal."

Maen put his paws to his chest. "Nothing like that. It's simply that your sword won't be of much use to you back home. If I recall, you have these things called guns." A grin spread across his face. "Lovely little inventions, those. However, I believe it best if you left Excalibur here."

"With you."

"With me."

“Amanda.” Mike grabbed her shoulder. “Don’t listen to him. We’re not going home.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What.”

A shudder ran through Mike’s body. He’d never seen that look in her eyes before. It was cold. “We’re not leaving,” he said, “Come on, you’ve got Excalibur. You can take these guys. And I’ve learned a few tricks of my own. You should hear my violin solo now.”

Her gaze hardened. Maen studied him with a guarded look.

“It’s always a bad time for jokes.” Mike cleared his throat. “Why do we have to go back at all? Mom and Dad are dead. Uncle Travis is dead. We’ve got no one.”

“No one but each other.” Amanda glared. “And who have we got in this world, Mike? This isn’t our home.”

Mike spread his arms wide. “Rafe’s my friend. I made a good impression on some dwarves. And if we wanted, there’s a farmer, his wife, and three kids who would be glad to take us in.”

Amanda’s face twisted into something unrecognizable. Was it hate? “Then it’s a good thing,” she said, “That you’re not the one in control here. I am.” Mike opened his mouth to protest. “And we’re going back to Earth, even if I have to drag you. Then everything will be how it was supposed to be.”

“Amanda!”

She turned on her heel and unbuckled Excalibur. “You want it?” She tossed it to Maen. “Take it. And keep Rui too. I don’t want anything to remind me of this place.”

Mike lunged for the sword, but the toss was too high. Maen caught Excalibur deftly. Rafe snatched at it, but the White Fox laughed and held it high. Selby broke free of the guards holding him and charged, but ten Fanfasms swarmed him at once. “Running away, partner?” he said to Amanda, “But wherever I fly, there is Hell. I am Hell.”

Amanda didn’t see the goblin that snuck up behind her. Nor did she see her own bat as it came down on the back of her head. “Amanda.” Mike fell to his knees beside her. The goblin reared back for another strike. A surge of anger welled up within Mike. Remember the music. Now, explode! The goblin flew back with a screech, a burn across half its face. Five cultists tackled Mike to the ground and held him there.

Maen watched with a sardonic smile. Rafe slung across one shoulder and Excalibur held in his other hand, he turned. “Bring them to my cabin,” he said and handed Excalibur to a bystander. “Put this in the cargo hold and set a guard over it. I’ll claim it once I am king. And set course for New Camelot.”

ACT THREE

Do or Die!

Amanda's eyes slowly swam back into focus. She was on the ground. Great. And lying on a pile of clothes. Doubly great. She knew this cabin. And she was not happy to be here.

"Amanda." Mike's voice. He was relieved. She felt a surge of anger. The idiot. Suggesting they stay in a world they didn't belong in.

She looked up and locked eyes with the White Fox, sitting perched on that same window-sill with a very amused expression on his face. "Okay, partner," she said, "What gives?"

Maen chuckled. "Oh, it's simple really. There's no reason for me to help you. I'm free, I have Excalibur, you're powerless to resist. What can you do? What resistance can you offer?"

"You're despicable," Rafe shouted. One of the soldiers punched him and he cried out. Maen snarled. With supernatural quickness, he pounced on the offending minion and pressed razor-claws to his throat.

"None of that," he snapped, "Leave my dear brother alone. Touch him again, and I will use your blood to decorate the deck."

"You're not my brother," Rafe snapped, "You can't be. He was noble and kind and he read me stories and made fireworks. He's nothing like you. You're the White Fox."

“Oh as to that, it’s simple.” Maen pointed to Mike and Amanda. “Blame their family. Their parents to be specific.”

Mike’s face grew hot. “That’s not fair. I mean, sure, they may not have been the best parents, but there’s no way you can blame them.” A horrible thought occurred to him. Mom had been a biologist. Dad a physicist. He pushed that line of thinking away.

Maen shrugged. Amanda glared at him. “Don’t blame my family,” she snarled, “For your own actions. Take responsibility for them yourself.”

Maen laughed. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed till tears streamed down his face. “Oh, this is ridiculous. To hear you lecturing me. To see you looking at me as if I am evil. Perhaps I am. But your kind is nothing but a bunch of duplicitous, amoral mud-men who never should have been granted sentience much less basic arithmetic. And your family, your parents were the worst of them all.”

He bared his teeth in a feral grin. “Do you know what they did to me? Do you? They bound me in chains, stripped me, strapped me down to a table, and when I cried out for a reason why they wouldn’t stop cutting, stabbing, and, this one’s the kicker, dissecting me. Soon, they promised, soon it will all be over. It never was.”

His eyes burned and watered with hatred. “Steel. Steel and iron have always been a weakness of the Fae. The closer you delve into magic, the more vulnerable to it you become. I couldn’t escape, I could only cower and plead for mercy. They gave me none. Oh, they didn’t kill me, but not from a sense of mercy. They needed me alive to continue their ‘experiments’.”

“But why? Why did they need me? Why did they need my power when already they have weapons that can wipe out cities? When they can move all the way around their

world by sitting down and waiting a few, measly hours? It's simple. They were greedy. They wanted to master me. To master magic. They did, to an extent."

"When I escaped, I fled back here. I demanded we raise an army and march on the human world, but father wouldn't budge. Therefore, I rebelled against him and tried to take the throne for myself. I lost and was sealed away." He gestured toward Amanda and grinned. "But now, with your help, I'm free. My army is stronger now and my time sealed in the Void has been well spent. I have learned arcane secrets that no one else wields. I shall crush any who oppose me."

"And you know the best part? The device that sent you here, the device that made this all possible? It was built using the research they gathered from torturing me! Dr. Merriweather, I knew his face from before. A weak-minded man. He was easy to bend to my will."

He drew very close and towered over her. The heat of his form washed over her like stepping out into a desert. "But I will prove I am better than you. I will prove that I am stronger, stronger than the entire human race. Soon, I will come with all the magic that can be found in the Island of Avalon and blot out your sun, shatter your moon, and rain the very stars down upon your heads."

Mike, Amanda, and Rafe stood frozen, staring at him in various states of shock. Maen laughed. "Take the humans away. I will deal with them later." He leered at them. "After all, what better guide to take us to Earth than two of its inhabitants?" He turned to Rafe. "And you will come with me. After all, it wouldn't be right to bury a king without his sons to attend him."

"You're not my brother," Rafe cried, "You can't be."

Maen smiled. "You're right. I'm not. At least, not anymore."

* * *

Amanda hated the cells. She hated them more now that she was inside one. It was cramped and too bright, impossible to take a nap and forget everything for an hour or so. The light had a way of getting under your eyelids and scorching them even when closed. She and Mike shared one, Captain Gale and her surviving crew, including Rui sans the collar, took another, and that shadow-guy had the last. His was the brightest cell which had some dampening effect on his powers.

Oh, and of course, the prisoners from King's Island were here too. Elder Tomas sat in the middle with them, leading them in some sort of prayer. She tried not to look their way.

The somber silence made it worse. No one would talk to her and only Mike even glanced her way. Well, the 'Grand Inquisitor' did, but it was hard to tell if his baleful gaze was directed at her or Mike.

"You're aware," he said with a seething voice, "That you all bear the responsibility for this entire situation, correct?"

Amanda scowled. "Oh golly gee. I'm sorry for not turning myself in for execution at your convenience."

Selby bristled and instinctively reached for his hip, but no sword rested there now. Captain Gale laughed. "Well, well, Inquisitor. Looks like your "law and duty" did more harm than good." She spat. "Blind obedience never does anyone any good."

Selby rounded on her. “Don’t lecture me, smuggler. And do not think you’re free of blame. You placed your own good above that of the nation. Every day, for mere profit you and your ilk undermine the safety and security of your neighbors. Well, this was the result: our land invaded and nation destroyed.”

Gale snarled. “What’s the other option? We stay in line, never question, never look beyond a couple of feet ahead. Give me the open ocean and the far-off horizon any day.”

“And where are you now? A cell.”

“Oh shove it.” The captain pressed against the bars. “We’re all in the same prison, Inquisitor. The least you could do is keep your sanctimonious sewage to yourself.”

“She’s right,” Rui shouted, “And besides, wasn’t it the prince who helped one of the humans, even after he knew what they were.” Gale’s crew muttered in agreement.

Mike jumped to his feet. “Don’t you dare talk about him like that,” he snapped, “Rafe only wanted to help you people. I only wanted to help.” His hand tightened into a fist. “If you want someone to blame, blame King Starchaser. Without his stupid law, none of this would have happened.”

The royal guardsmen glowered. “And don’t dare speak ill of the king, human,” one snarled, “Especially not since your sister is an ally of his sworn enemy, the rebel prince.” His eyes were cold. “If we’d been more alert, we could have killed you and saved our world. So,” he pointed to Rui, “It’s his fault. He could have told us, but he wanted to ‘watch’.”

“I didn’t want to have an innocent person killed,” Rui protested, “And by the time I knew what she was going to do, it was too late.”

“What possible reason could she, a human, have had to visit King’s Island other than to claim Excalibur?”

Rui looked down. “I thought her brother was being held there.”

The guardsman snorted. “You should have told us. We could have rectified the problem.”

Amanda banged her fist against the cell bars. Beaten and broken in spirit she might be, but this conversation roused the last coals of fury within her. “Don’t you hear yourself? You’re saying murder is right! I don’t care what ‘cause’ it’s for. Murder is wrong. You can’t kill whoever you like, idiot. Maybe if you weren’t homicidal maniacs, I wouldn’t have had to go to the extremes I did.”

Gale snarled. “Shut up. This is your fault.”

“Indeed. But I suppose now she must try to defend herself.” Selby glowered.

Amanda pointed to herself. “I was trying to save my brother. Adventure, fame, the law? Fine. Whatever. I was protecting my family. There is no better cause than that.”

“What is one family in the face of a nation’s needs?” Selby countered.

“What good is a nation if it oppresses its people?” Gale snapped.

“And were you concerned about the freedom of others or turning a profit?” the guardsman snarled.

“You all sat on your rear ends and got paid for it,” Gale said.

“For good reason,” Selby said, “We all know the threat humanity posed. They did something to Maen. Those of us who are older remember how changed he was from his trip to their world. Though individuals may be exceptions,” He nodded to Mike. “As a whole, they are to blame.”

Mike swallowed. “Maen said our parents tortured him in their experiments.”

Amanda ground her teeth. “There’s no proof of that. Only the word of a mad fox”

Rui banged on the bars of his cell. “This is your fault. You have no right to speak.”

“Shut up, Rui,” Amanda snapped. “If you all had left me alone...”

“If you’d done your duty...”

“If you weren’t so inflexible...”

“If you’d warned us...”

“If the king hadn’t passed that law...”

“Then none of this would have happened!” They glared at each other, breathless.

They fell silent, breathing heavily and glaring at each other.

Elder Tomas spoke for the first time. “It seems to me,” he said, “That you all sought after good things. It also seems, however, that this was inevitable.”

“Inevitable,” Gale repeated, “We just figured out all the different ways this could have been avoided, old man.”

“And yet,” Tomas said, “I maintain that this, or something like this, was inevitable. You were set on a collision course the moment you decided what in life was most important.”

Mike studied him. An old man saying cryptic words. Probably wise. This fit right in. “Go on,” he urged.

The old man cleared his throat. “Well, let’s start with you,” he said, “You wanted adventure, yes?” Mike nodded. “And there is nothing wrong with that.”

He turned to Amanda. "You wanted to save your brother. And you should!" To Selby. "You wanted to defend your country. It is good and noble to do so." To Captain Gale. "You, my dear, sought wealth. Money is not evil in and of itself. It can do a great deal of good." He pointed to himself. "I, too, wanted something good. I wanted to finish my book. The king wanted to protect himself and his son. Even your parents, children, sought knowledge, correct?"

"Yes," Mike said with some hesitation.

"Of course they did," Amanda snapped.

Elder Tomas nodded. "And knowledge is a beautiful thing. To understand the world is one of life's greatest challenges and excitements."

"And yet," Rui said with a scowl, "They tortured someone."

"Indeed," Elder Tomas said, "Because, even though knowledge is a good thing, it is not the best thing. Neither is family or adventure or a nation. But when you make it the most important thing, it makes you do horrible things or blind to the evil you cause. Everyone can see and fight what is purely evil, but it is harder to see the evil that good things cause." He smiled. "In other words, the merely good is the worst enemy of the best."

"I didn't..." Amanda began.

"You did," Selby snapped.

"Want," Amanda continued, "For any of this to happen."

"No," Rui said, "But you didn't care that it did."

Elder Tomas held up his hands. “Please, let us not start that again.” He leaned forward. “In fact, allow me to make a proposal. Set aside your individual goods and turn to the Greatest Good. Only then will you be able to act in harmony.”

Mike gestured for him to continue.

“God,” Elder Tomas said, “The god who led King Arthur to greatness. The god who made the universe. The god who, if you ask it of him, will lead you down the right path. Not the easy path, but the right path.”

Amanda laughed. “Oh man, you had me going for a moment there.” She held up her hands. “Look, Mike and I have been to church. It works for some people, but I don’t see how praying and singing a few songs will help right now.”

Elder Tomas’ eyes flashed. “It is not so simple as that,” he said, “You must hold Him above all other things. If ever something should become more important, you will fall back to where you were before. But God is the author of all good. And only he can help you properly order them.” He rose and folded his arms over each other. “But look at it this way: if you all can’t agree on something, you will never defeat Maen.”

Mike gripped the bars of his cell. “You think we can.”

“I do.” Tomas gestured

Selby’s shoulders slumped. “He has an army and who knows how powerful he is now. We are only a few. We might be able to take the ship, but we couldn’t win the battle.”

Elder Tomas chuckled and it was a wholesome sound that filled their hearts with curious warmth. “Look before you. Here, we have the only two in Avalon who can wield Excalibur to its full power. The king can, but not as well as they. If anyone is to save this

land, it must be us.” He extended his arms. “At least grant me this: Maen must be defeated. To do so, we must unite. Set aside your differences for a time. Embrace a higher good. If we win, we win. If we lose, then we die in service of something greater.”

One by one, they began to nod. Amanda felt rebellion rising in her until Mike nodded as well. He turned to her and smiled. “Come on, Amanda,” he said.

She felt as if a stone wall were around her heart. Why should he care? Why should she? This wasn’t their world. She could say yes and then take him back to Earth at the first opportunity. That was the sensible thing. The smart thing. Mike’s smile faded. He reached for her and she recoiled, but he caught her and pulled her into a hug.

“I love you,” he said, “I always will. But I’m not all there is in the world.”

Her vision blurred. Hot tears fell down her cheeks. She fell against him and clutched him tightly. “I wanted to save you. I couldn’t lose you too.”

“I know.”

“I...” She choked. “I messed up, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” he said, “But let’s go make it right.”

Amanda took a deep breath. “Okay,” she said, “Okay. Let’s go. Not for us, but for...” She wasn’t quite ready to say it yet.

Mike squeezed her tight. “Yeah. Let’s go.” They turned back to the rest of the cellblock.

Rui looked them over. “I guess we need a plan then.”

* * *

Mike's violin music wafted gently through the air of the cellblock. It was the one thing he'd managed to keep. It didn't change anything about the situation. No magic came to him. Part of the cell's construction blocked the working of magic. They had no more hope than they did before. Yet the world seemed brighter and happier with a little touch of beauty.

Then, the door slammed open. A troop of ten goblins marched in, carrying steel torches and with grim, hateful expressions on their shrunk faces. Mike ignored them and continued playing. "Oi. You there," the sergeant snarled, "Cut that out or I'll rip out yer insides and skip rope wit 'em."

Mike paused, tuned one of his strings, and kept playing.

The goblins hissed in anger. The sergeant drew out a key and moved to put it in the lock, but Amanda's hand lashed out through the bars and snatched them. She punched him in the face for good measure. The goblins leapt back, yammering and hollering in alarm. "Git the crossbows," the sergeant ordered, "We'll shoot these two and stick 'em on the roasting spit." The goblins cheered and six of them ran off to go grab the weapons. Mike kept playing.

Amanda grinned at the sergeant. "Hey. Want to hear something cool?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "Wot tat?"

"I may not have been our team's pitcher, but I can still throw a pretty good fastball."

The sergeant frowned. "Wot's that supposed to..." The keys whizzed by his head. Rui caught them neatly. The goblins turned right as the door opened with a click. Captain

Gale and her crew strode out and advanced on the goblins. The captain cracked her knuckles and grinned like a crocodile.

“Well, well, well,” she said, “Get ‘em, boys.”

The crew piled on the four goblins and they disappeared into a storm of flailing limbs and screams. Rui unlocked the other cell doors. Mike nodded to him and, to the boy’s surprise, the Feyfolk returned it.

By the time the six other goblins came back, an ambush awaited them. Selby’s sword of shadows cut through them like butter. They stood no chance, for his wrath was kindled. Their own shadows leapt up to entangle and strangle them as he slew them.

He cleaned his blade and turned to address the others. “Six crossbows,” he said, “And ten goblin-swords. The best fighters from the guard and Gale’s crew should each grab a weapon. There will be plenty more for everyone once we have taken down a few more enemies.”

“Be swift and silent,” Elder Tomas warned, “We do not know how far the attack has come. If Maen is still onboard, do not face him without Excalibur.”

“Above all,” Selby said, “Protect the humans. Without them, we lose our best chance at victory.” He held his sword aloft. “Forward.”

The lower decks were silent, abandoned. Selby led the way, sword at the ready. Three crossbowmen and five swordsmen followed him. The rest formed the rear guard. Mike and Amanda were in the middle with those who were unarmed.

A creak came from up ahead. They stopped. From ahead of them, a skeleton slowly walked into view. It turned towards them with empty sockets. Like a poorly made

robot, it drew a sword and advanced. A crossbow through the skull sent it tumbling over, a pile of bones.

“Vampire magic,” Selby spat, “But we are in luck. If those things are wandering around, the rest of the crew has disembarked. The vampires only activate those things when they aren’t going to be around to crew the ship themselves.”

“What you’re saying is,” Mike said, “They left behind a skeleton crew.”

The inquisitor glared balefully at him.

“Continuing,” he said, “Guardsmen, go with the humans and find Excalibur. Check every cargo hold. The rest of you, with me.” He strode off down the hall. “We’re taking the helm.”

Rui piped up. “I’m going with Amanda.”

“If that is what you wish,” Selby said. He disappeared into the shadows with a sweep of his cape.

“Holler if you need help,” Captain Gale said, “And Rui.”

He straightened. “Yes, Captain?”

“Don’t screw this up.” She turned to her crew and began belting out orders.

“Alright, scum, listen up. Missen, you keep an eye out for trouble. Torbu, nice shot with the crossbow. Keep it up. Misa.”

Mike and Amanda, along with their escort, descended into the cargo hold. Boxes sat stacked one upon the other, covered in canvas. Supplies Maen needed for his war. Several huge barrels bore the label “Feyfolken” and then a second label like “Earth” or “Animal” or “Spirit”. Mike rapped his knuckles against one. “Think it’s hidden in one of these?”

“Do not open those,” Elder Tomas warned, “They are full of blood. Food for the vampires who built this fleet.”

Rui turned to Amanda. “And you thought these were the good guys?”

“No,” she muttered, “I tried not to think at all.”

The rest of the cargo hold contained nothing of interest. However, one of the guards pulled aside a curtain and revealed a huge door. They crept up to it. Rui pulled it open slightly and peeked inside. His eyes went wide and he slammed it shut again. “They have a...”

“Cave troll?” Mike quipped. Amanda rolled her eyes and punched his shoulder.

“Close,” Rui said, “An ogre. A small one, but enough to cause some trouble. And enough to maybe smash holes in the hull if he got angry enough.”

“What’s he doing now?” Amanda asked.

“Laying down with his eyes closed. Could be asleep.”

“Really?” Amanda grinned. “Well then, I think I see an opportunity.”

* * *

Life for an ogre can get pretty monotonous. Sure, there’s always another town to smash, but eventually you run out of the little ones and have to go find something bigger. And bigger meant more little maggots with pointy sticks and flashy magic. And stone walls. Those were the worst.

Guarding a pointy stick, on the other hand, was easy. Sleep all day, crack an eye open, and watch the door; no problem. Anyone came in, they got squished. Except the

one who brought dinner. He could leave, so long as he promised to bring more food in the future.

Speaking of which, it was about time for dinner, wasn't it? The ogre licked his lips and sat up, but there were already two little people here! Wait, no, two came after three. One. No, that was first. It was two. This was strange. Usually, only one brought the meal. Maybe tonight's was so large it took two to carry it. But why were they standing there, smiling at him, and not moving.

He frowned. Were they lunch?

"Hurry up, Rui..." the longer-haired one said. Why did they look similar?

He heard something above him and looked up. A third! Hanging from the ropes running along the ceiling. He was smiling. "Hey there, big guy." The ogre drooled. He looked meaty and tasty. And the ceiling-hanger agreed. He was drooling to.

Pain flooded the ogre's mind. Something burned in his eye. The ceiling one had spit on him and now it burned. He let out a roar of rage and thrashed about.

"Now," the long-haired one said. The door banged open. Crossbows twanged. More pain! He tried to rise, but the back of his head began to burn. And then, something sharp stabbed into his ankle. This was a very bad day.

"Reload," a tiny ordered. He glowered through his one good eye. The ceiling one dropped onto his head. His face filled the ogre's vision. He spat once more and all sight vanished. With a bellow, the ogre tried to throw him off, but he slipped backwards and behind him.

"Got the sword," the long-haired one said.

The shiny stick was stolen. What was he supposed to do now? The ogre racked his brain. The white foxy had said something very detailed. It made his head hurt. “If Excalibur is about to be stolen, you’re to pull this lever and jettison this portion of the cargo hold. It is better that the sword be lost than it fall into the humans’ hands again.” That was it.

He groped for the lever. “Oh no. Run.” the ceiling-one said. He heard them scrambling away, but his hand closed on the lever. He grinned and let out a roar of triumph as he pulled. Immediately, the floor dropped from under him and he fell down, down, down out of sight.

Mike leaned over the edge. “Wow. That’s horrifying. Why does this even exist?”

“Emergencies,” Rui replied, “If something in the cargo hold endangers the ship, drop it into the sea.” He indicated the huge hole where the other room’s floor had been. “Or in this case, New Camelot.”

They peered down. Fire raged below. A line of cultists advanced on the silver battalions of the Royal Guard. They formed a line defending the palace, but Maen’s legions forced them into constant retreat. They were holding, but they wouldn’t for long.

As they watched, a surge from the cultists broke the line in half. Amanda thought she saw Maen, leading the charge with green flame and deadly speed. Before the royal guard could reform, he and his forces were through the front gate. Maen sealed it behind them with a spell that burned anyone who got too close. Another legion of the guard poured into the city from the main gate, flanking the cultists, but they were too late to stop Maen.

Things were not going well. They were not going well at all. Amanda gritted her teeth and hoisted Excalibur. “We should get going,” she said, “Come on.”

“Yeah,” Mike gulped. “We better get down there as soon as possible.”

* * *

Captain Gale leaned forward, “Faster!” The ship lurched as it slammed into another and sent it careening out of the sky. “Yes, twelve down, three to go.”

“Captain,” Inquisitor Selby said, “I believe losing two ships in one day would call a commander’s skill into question.”

“Save it,” she snapped, hunched over the wheel, “Full speed ahead. Hold nothing back.”

The wind whipped past their ears. Bolts of fire and lightning struck the ship again and again, tearing chunks of the hull apart. Groups of cultists gathered together on the few other remaining ships, combining their magic into massive spells. They’d turned them away from their bombardment of the city upon their former flagship. Mike and Amanda held onto the door frame at the back of what had been the control box. Now, sans a roof, it was more of an open design. Like a convertible.

“I think they know we aren’t on their side,” Rui shouted.

“What gave you that idea?” Amanda snapped.

Inquisitor Selby pulled himself forward, holding tight to the railing. “Captain Gale, have you absolutely lost your mind? If you keep this up, they will tear us apart and the ship will crash.”

She grinned sharkishly at him. “That’s the idea.”

“What?”

“Well, two problems. First, there’s this fleet. And then, his royal whiteness has the gate to the castle sealed,” Gale said, “After we’re done here, we’re going to play battering ram.”

“I was right. You have lost your mind.” Selby’s horror filled his voice.

“We’ll find out soon enough.” The ship rammed another right in the midsection and broke it in half. Whatever the flagship was made of, it was sturdy. Yet not quite sturdy enough. It tilted forward and began to fall. “Looks like our number’s up. Down we goooooo.”

The ship reeled and fell, flames streaming up the sides. Captain Gale held tight to the controls and barely managed to steer. Mike and Amanda wrapped themselves in ropes and held on. The gate appeared above the bow, then disappeared under it. The ship careened madly. The world became a blur and Captain Gale’s cry of “Brace for Impact!” was the only warning before it slammed into the ground.

It bounced and slid. Mike and Amanda were almost thrown forward, but a magical buffer, a safety measure of some kind, surrounded them and kept them from flying to near-certain death. The ship shot forward down the cobblestone streets, tearing up huge sections and cracking the fronts of buildings. The gate appeared up ahead. With a thunderous crash, the ship tore through it and turned it to splinters and kindling.

And it kept going, losing speed until it came to rest at the steps of the palace. Any forces that Maen might have left to guard it were scattered and stunned. Captain Gale and her crew recovered first. With a battlecry, she led them over the side and charged the

cultists. Selby led the King's Island garrison against another ogre. From behind, a great shout went up. The royal guard poured into the courtyard, blades and spells at the ready. It was a battle again.

A roar shook the sky. A dragon appeared on top of the castle. "Meerax," Mike called. With speed that seemed impossible for something her size, she shot forward and engaged Maen's two remaining ships. Fire and lightning shot out at her, but neither so much as scratched her scales.

Amanda drew Excalibur. "Mike, Rui, looks like everything's under control out here. Time we got even with a certain devious white fox."

Mike pulled out his violin and held out his hand. A spark of magic flew between his fingers. He nodded. "Ready."

Rui drew his sword. His face was grim, but he didn't tremble or quail. "I'll watch the rear. Mike, you're in the middle."

"Roger that, commander."

"Right then." Amanda pointed Excalibur towards the castle. "We're coming for you, partner. Say your prayers."

They slid over the side and up the steps. Selby broke away from the fight and joined them. "The Captain seems to have this well in hand," he explained, "And besides, I must save the king and Rafe, if I can." They were glad to have him.

The castle, such a peaceful place before, had become a hall of death. Piles of dust with a few scraps of half-rusted metal lay where the vampires had fallen. The shrunk forms of goblins and Fanfasms littered the sides of the halls, desiccated and dry as mummies. Cultists lay, burned, scorched, torn asunder by claws, or dead from swords.

Armor bearing the mark of the Royal Guard lay on the ground like discarded tin cans, but no signs of the soldiers themselves.

The four made their way silently, careful not to disturb the remains. Only the middle of the hall had a path free of corpses, armor, dust, or anything else. Eerie quiet reigned over castle. They feared that, perhaps, they were already too late.

“Where’s all the fighting?” Mike asked, nervously holding his cutlass at the ready.

“Wherever the King is,” Salby answered with a grim expression. “He wants revenge. The King is his first target.”

Mike shuddered and broke into a sprint. “Come on then. We’ve got to hurry. We can still get to the throne room in time.”

They reached the same place where Mike, Rafe, and the King had eaten that wonderful lunch together a few days ago and met with a swirling vortex of magic blocking their way. Amanda tried to push through, but it picked her up and threw her aside.

“Try this again,” Amanda said. She swung with Excalibur and nearly had it ripped from her hands. “Nope. That’s not happening.”

Mike peered through to see what was on the other side. He paled. “Uh, guys? I think we may have an ever-so slight problem.”

In the middle of the throne room, the last members of the Royal Guard fought with Maen’s cultists in a desperate struggle. King Starchaser stood alongside them, cutting left and right with swords and spears of blue flame. But by the door stood Maen, Rafe held captive at his side. And every time a soldier on either side fell, Maen extended

his claws and pulled some magical energy from them into him. With each intake, he swelled slightly. He grew taller and stronger, but no more healthy.

“Humans,” Selby said, “Grab hold of my cloak.”

Amanda glanced sideways at him. “You got a plan then.”

Selby nodded, “We are going to take a walk through the shadows.” To Rui, he said, “Stay here and keep watch. If the Royal Guard comes, have them assemble and be ready to charge. I will lower the barrier.”

Rui gripped his sword tight and nodded. “Right.”

With some trepidation, Mike and Amanda took hold of Selby’s cloak. It was cold, like it had been stuck in the freezer. “Walk through the shadows?” Mike repeated.

“Indeed.” Selby stepped up towards the wall, right where the shadows were deepest, and the entire world changed.

Mike and Amanda could never describe the experience. It was like looking into the sun, but in reverse. The darkness hurt their eyes and the light hid things from them. The world seemed faint and insubstantial. A single step could take them an inch or ten thousand miles. The shadows were all connected.

And then, they emerged back to the world they knew and the sound of the battle hit them like a wave. Amanda wasted no time. She drew Excalibur and aimed a strike at Maen’s back. She knew better than to shout some stupid taunt. That would let the jerk know she was there. However, Rafe saw her and threw himself in front of his brother. She reeled backwards, yanking Excalibur off-course.

“You idiot. I had him,” she snapped. Rafe looked down. Then, Amanda caught sight of the collar around his neck. “Oh.”

Maen turned. "Oh? You escaped I see." He smiled. "The Inquisitor and the humans. Unlikely allies united to defeat a common enemy, I presume." He gestured towards them. "Brother, take care of them."

"No, I..." Rafe's hands raised and ignited. "Mike, I'm sorry."

Maen smirked and strode toward the battle. Amanda moved to follow, but Rafe blocked her and threw a ball of fire. She dodged it contemptuously. She again tried to follow Maen, but four cultists and a fanfasm moved to back Rafe.

Mike tuned his violin. There were a lot of targets in here. And he was a glass cannon. Probably 'cannon' was a bit of an overstatement. A nice .22 rifle, perhaps. But then, Inquisitor Selby appeared. He stepped out of one cultist's shadow and cut him down. The others whirled and struck at him, but he vanished and came from another's shadow. Two fell, then the fourth. The fanfasm faded from sight before he could also be killed.

Rafe threw a fireball at him. Selby stepped aside. Amanda lunged forward to tackle the young prince, but he skipped away. "The collar," Amanda shouted to Mike.

Mike's eyes locked on the horrible strip of metal. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Music. Note. Aim for the collar. Now, explode! And hope to God that Rafe's head wasn't blown off in the process.

A beam of light streaked from his fingertips. Rafe's eyes widened. He recoiled, but the bolt changed direction mid-air and blew the collar into two. Rafe gasped and fell to his knees. His eyes cleared.

Amanda stared at Mike. "That is a nice trick."

An explosion drew their attention. The cultists and Royal Guard lay dead on the floor. Maen and the king fought. The White Fox was even bigger now, twice as tall as before. Blue and green flames met and twisted in the air. The King fought with magic and blade but couldn't strike a decisive blow. They could see that he was tiring. His sword swung slowly through the air. His flames died too soon. Maen drew ever nearer to his throat with each slash of his bloody claws.

Selby sprinted to the King's aid. Amanda leapt forward. Mike put his bow to the strings. Rafe conjured fire. But they moved too slow to prevent what came next.

The King's sword came up but flew from his grasp, knocked aside by the fallen prince. Maen's mouth twisted into a nightmare grin as his claws settled about the King's throat. "No," Rafe cried. There was a flash of light and the four children shielded their eyes. When they could see again, the king was gone. Maen turned to them and smiled. Green fire erupted from his tail and his eyes took on a red hue. "Long live the king," he said, "By right of conquest, I claim the throne of Avalon and all the power that goes with it."

The White Fox cackled and swelled. The vortex of magic shielding the throne-room, meant to keep intruders out, warped, twisted, and flooded into him. He grew taller and taller. With a swipe of his claws, he shattered the king's beloved kitchen. With his tail, he smashed the throne. He reared back and let out a howl. The very light in the room turned radiation green.

Rage filled Selby. He charged, the shadows twisting and warping around him. His form blurred, his sword became the length of a spear. His eyes glowed with fierce, yellow light. Maen bent down and knocked him aside with one claw. Selby's sword slashed at

his arm, but the wounds healed instantly. With a roar, Maen lunged after him, but the Inquisitor vanished right underneath his claws.

Rafe turned to Mike and Amanda, his face pale. “Run.”

They ran. Amanda grabbed Rui and they ran.

“To the library,” Mike shouted.

Amanda glanced sideways at him. “Why?”

“If anyplace is still defended, it’s got to be the place with a dragon in it.”

“Good a guess as any,” Rafe agreed, “Run faster.”

They made it without Maen’s claws grabbing them from behind and pounded on the sealed doors. “Meerax,” Rafe shouted, “It’s me. Open up.”

“Rafe?” the dragon said, “Open the doors. Quickly.”

It felt like forever before the doors opened, but it couldn’t have been more than thirty seconds. Meerax ushered them in and slammed them shut again. The homunculi immediately began piling furniture and other heavy items against them. Meerax, on the other hand, was busy cleaning her scales. They were covered in soot from her fight with the ships and a girl had to look pretty for the apocalypse.

“What are we going to do? What are we going to do?” Mike panicked. “He killed the King. Reached out and snapped his neck or something.”

“Begging your pardon, but he didn’t,” Meerax said.

“Oh yeah? How do you know?” Amanda asked.

“Everyone in this palace wears a certain badge of my own design with a ‘recall’ spell placed upon it,” the dragon said, “When they receive a critical blow, so long as they

do not die, they are teleported here, unconscious but whole. The King arrived not five minutes ago.” She sighed. “But that is not the problem.”

“What is the problem?” Mike and Amanda said together.

“It appears that Maen is somehow leeching the magical power from everyone he fights, both his own forces and the Royal Guard,” Meerax said, “And now he has stolen the King’s power. I shudder to think what would become of me were he to do the same to me.”

“Can we survive without our magic?” Rafe asked.

Meerax nodded. “Yes. Though things that were once easy will become very difficult. The greater threat comes from if he tries to absorb the magic of the land itself.”

Rafe paled. “How is that possible?”

“Our entire world is built upon and relies upon magic,” Meerax said, “We all draw from it. But if he draws too much of it out, Avalon will sink into the Void Sea and never be seen again. Or rather, it has already begun to. With the king’s defeat, the critical threshold has been passed. Our world is doomed.”

Mike and Amanda exchanged grim glances. A moment of silent communication passed between them. “No,” Amanda said.

“Come on,” Mike grinned. “We’ve got to. This is the only way to save them all. Besides, we can take the adventure home with us.”

“No.” Amanda shook her head.

“What then? Leave them to die.”

Amanda sighed. “I hate it when you’re right.”

Meerax peered down at them. “What are you planning, humans?”

“Simple. If your world is destroyed, then come to ours,” Mike said, “The human world.”

Meerax reared back. “The human world? The situation may be desperate, but that is no reason to contemplate suicide!”

“You’re literally facing death,” Amanda said, “I’d think that any other option would be welcome right about now.”

“How do we get home anyway?” Mike asked, “Rafe and I never got that far.”

Meerax closed her eyes. “The Fey Roads. They lead to other worlds, if they are aligned correctly.” The floor shook. “There. The collapse, it has already begun.”

“Then we should hurry,” Amanda said.

“What do we need to do? How do we align them?” Mike demanded.

“There are two ways,” Meerax said gravely, “One, through study and care you align it ahead of time, or the more dangerous route, you walk it yourself and force it to go where you will. But that, well, one of you would need to do that. For it to work, you must know the place you intend to go very well. But unless one of you can wield magic...”

Mike held up a hand and sparks of magic flew off it. “Gotcha covered.” He grinned at Amanda. “Looks like we’re going to have a bunch of fairy-tale creatures show up in my bedroom, eh?”

“I’m not going to abandon everyone else,” Rafe said, “I’m their prince. It’s my duty to look out for them.” He looked to Meerax. “Can we open all the Fey Roads? Can they all be sent to the same place?”

“Theoretically,” Meerax said with hesitation, “Either that, or they could be merged. The one in the Palace is the largest, so if we sent a nationwide order to merge with the Royal Road...”

“Then I know what I must do,” Rafe went to the door, “I will go to the Hall of Dreams and send a message to everyone in the Avalon and beyond to flee.”

“I’ll get the portal where it needs to go,” Mike said, “Where do I do that?”

“Anywhere in the palace,” Meerax answered, “Right here is a fitting place. Once it is secure, my homunculi will help the king and injured soldiers through. Then, we will gather what books we can and follow.” She bit her lip. “Though I do hate to leave this place.”

“There are plenty of book on Earth. New ones,” Mike offered. Her face lit up. Despite himself, Mike chuckled. Book-Wyrm indeed.

“And I,” Amanda said, “Will face Maen.”

They stared at her. “Amanda, that’s suicide,” Rui exclaimed.

“For anyone else, yes.” She put her hand on her sword. “But I have Excalibur. I’m the only one who can.” She smirked. “Besides, do you think he’s going to let us walk merrily around and save the world? Of course not. Someone needs to distract him long enough for everyone to get out.”

“Amanda,” Mike said.

“No, Mike. This is the only way to save you. No, to save everyone.” Amanda squared her shoulders. “I caused this mess. It’s time to face that responsibility.” She squared her shoulders. “Meerax, open the door. Rui, go with Rafe. Make sure he gets to,

what was it, the Hall of Dreams safely.” She drew Excalibur. “Time to see if this fox still bleeds.”

* * *

Maen was waiting for them right behind the library doors. “The wards on this place, truly impressive,” he said, “Ah, if it isn’t my brother, my partner, her brother and her little pet.” His grin sickened her. So large had he grown that now, even under the vaulted ceiling, he crouched on all fours. Nine tails whipped around in a frenzy behind him and his eyes glowed solid red. “Nice to see you all again.”

Rafe stepped forward, jaw clenched, but Rui laid a hand on his shoulder. “Come, my prince,” Rui said, “We’ve got to hurry.” Rafe hesitated for a moment and then ran down the hall.

“Leaving so soon. I don’t think so,” Maen made to leap upon them but Amanda threw herself in the way, brandishing Excalibur. For a moment, Maen’s eyes widened, but his leer returned in an instant. “Then it has come to this. Once again, I will face that blade.”

“And the scabbard,” Amanda said, “You know what that means. I can’t be killed.”

“But that does not mean you can’t be defeated.” With a snarl, he sent a curtain of green flame at her. A strange calm came over her. She raised Excalibur and sliced the air. The flames parted before her and left her unharmed.

She smiled. “Let’s test that theory, shall we?”

* * *

Mike's first step into the space between worlds reminded him of a trip he'd taken to a planetarium with his father. It had been the 'boy's day out', a rare moment when he'd taken precedence over his father's work. He remembered looking up at the stars wheeling above, much faster than they did in real life, and seeing the planets spin round. "You see that?" his father had said, "All this, all of it, will one day belong to humanity. We have to keep to the course and trust that science will take us there."

Worlds spun around him and stars danced above his head and below his feet. A single, silver path lay before him, weak and pale, winding this way and that and ending in nothing. Home. He had to think of home. Magic was made by the will, as science was made in the intellect and faith in the heart. He took a deep breath and pulled out his violin.

Still he hesitated. A voice cried out to him to turn back. There was a battle, a real battle, the final clash between good and evil. The fate of a world hung in the balance behind him. And here he was headed home. Home where everyone ignored him. Home where he was nothing special. Where he had "wasted his potential" and not "followed in his parent's footsteps".

Avalon, the legendary resting place of King Arthur, what better place could there be? Perhaps it could still be saved. If Maen was struck down, the magic would return to the land. Yes, and if he and Amanda did it together, they could live forever as heroes. Like Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, remembered forever in the land they saved. He

could almost taste it. The cheers, the gratitude, the endless showering of praise and gifts. Life would be perfect.

No. It was too late for those thoughts. He'd tried being a hero. It hadn't worked out as he'd hoped. And trying to make everything fit into his vision of the future had only made things worse. The land couldn't be saved, but the people still could. It was time to focus.

He drew his bow across the strings. The first sweet notes drifted into the silent void. They went, laughing and playing, among the stars and the stars turned to listen. They swirled round and drew near, strengthening the path beneath his feet and making it straight. In the distance, he saw Earth, a shining blue and white ball in a sea of lights. He straightened his shoulders and stepped forward.

A barrier crackled to life in front of him. He stretched out a finger towards it and yelped when it zapped him. "Huh," he said, "That's, uh, unexpected." A mad cackle made him turn. The three Ragged Sisters floated up to him, forms pulsing with darkness and power

"Clever, clever," the ancient one said, "Clever boy. But not clever enough."

Mike faltered. "What are you all doing here?"

"We are here," the swollen one said, "To block anyone trying to leave. Like you."

"Our barrier prevents anyone from leaving. Yes, yes," the skeletal one said brightly, "Though please, dear child, don't stop playing. Your songs remind me of things, pleasant things."

Her sisters rounded on her. "Silence, fool," the ancient one hissed, "His songs are of the sun and the light and the trees. You have no part in those things anymore."

“No,” the swollen one said, “Not anymore.”

Mike looked at her, really looked at her for the first time. She was younger than he thought, maybe only twenty. The painful thinness in her limbs made her look older. She looked sad and in that moment he pitied her. He took a deep breath. “You could see the sun and trees again if you wanted to.”

The ancient one laughed. “Fool. With our power comes a curse. That is the price that all must pay for power.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Mike snapped. He looked the skeletal witch right in the eye. She dropped her gaze. “What’s your name?”

She was surprised. “Mara, child.”

“Mara,” Mike repeated with a smile, “That’s a pretty name. If you like my music, let me play some more for you.” He put his bow to the strings once again and played a rousing jig, one of the first songs he’d mastered.

The other witches scowled. “Don’t listen to him,” the swollen one snapped, “Concentrate. Feed all your power into the barrier.”

“You want to see the light and the sun again, don’t you?” Mike asked, “Let me guess, this life isn’t what you thought it would be. You thought if you could do this one thing, it would make everything else make sense. You could fulfill all your dreams.” Was he talking to her or himself? He didn’t know. “But it didn’t. And now you don’t know what to do, so you keep on the course you’ve set before yourself.”

He smiled at her. “Come on. Leave this all behind. Come with me. Start a new life. You’ll see the sun and the birds and the trees. You’ll hear people play music much better than I can. And maybe you’ll find that the world is better than you knew. I hope it

is. But that remains to be seen. However, we'll never find out if we don't at least try." He stopped playing and extended a hand. "Mara, come with me."

The witch glanced left and right. She swallowed and a bit of color returned to her cheeks. "I will."

She lowered her hands and the barrier shattered.

"You fool," the ancient witch screamed. "You shouldn't have done that. The two of us are more than a match for you."

Mara cried in alarm and ran behind Mike. He took a step back, but drew his bow across the strings. A sharp, loud burst of magic slammed into the two sisters and flung them back. But they recovered and cackled. Dark power flowed through them. Mike's puny magic was not nearly enough.

"Well, well, well." Mike looked up and saw Inquisitor Selby, flanked by a whole contingent of the Inquisitorial Corps. "Once, I never would have believed it, but it looks like Rafe was right. The human is guiding the path to safety." A twisted smile appeared on his face. "And look. A couple of heretics are trying to stop him. Well, we can't have that, can we my brothers and sisters?"

The Inquisitors drew their weapons. Selby conjured his sword of shadows and leveled it at the two witches. "Death to the Heretics."

The witches screamed and vanished in flashes of smoke. Selby laughed. "Yes. Run away. Run back to your master and tell him of your failure, your utter and complete failure." He turned back to Mike. "Now, young Master Mike."

Mike took an instinctive step away from him. "Yes, Grand Inquisitor?"

Selby regarded him for a moment and bowed. “Forgive me for ever doubting you.” He rose and straightened. “Human, lead on and save us all.”

Mike grinned and began playing once more. “Aye, aye, Commander. Can’t stop this crazy train. Next stop: Earth!”

* * *

Amanda stood face to face with a horror beyond her greatest imagination. Sure, she’d seen some things like it on the screen, but that paled in comparison to facing down the horrid eyes, the rancid breath, and the steaming claws that melted everything they touched. And to top it off, the island was sinking.

She didn’t know if, even with Excalibur, she could win. She was tired, out of breath. It was like the worst bits of baseball practice all lumped together. Yet the White Fox showed no signs of weariness. If anything, he was getting faster. Now, she had managed to take out a few of Maen’s followers, the idiots that tried to help their master and attack her, but Maen laughed and absorbed their power into himself.

“You can’t win,” he said. He reared back to strike and his back broke the ceiling above them. She threw herself out of the way of his claws and the falling debris.

“But I can’t lose,” she countered.

Maen huffed. “A conundrum. The decision is yours. Will we two one-time partners fight until the world crashes down around us?”

“If need be.” Amanda brandished Excalibur.

Maen chuckled. "Come now, Amanda, this isn't what you want. You want to be home. You want to save your brother." He leaned down. "I promise, if you stop fighting me right now, I will send you home. There's no need for all this fighting."

"Yeah. Not buying it. You already lied once. You've tricked me every step of the way here." She glared. "You're going down."

"You and what army?" Maen said, "That sword won't even scratch me! You could cut me ten thousand times and I would still be able to fight."

Amanda sighed. "Look, I know this wasn't the smartest idea. Mike's probably safe right now." Maen's smile faltered. "But you know, that's great and all, but there are a lot of other people who need saving. And I'm going to buy them the time they need."

"You'll die."

"Perhaps." Amanda chuckled. Maen snarled and unleashed a torrent of fire at her. Once again, Excalibur moved of its own accord and protected her. "If I'm being honest, I could die right here. Not too smart of me, right?"

Maen's claws slashed the air in front of her face. She parried and shoved him back with a grin.

"Still, this feels good. With you, not even my 'smart reasoning' felt right."

Whips of flame lashed out towards her. She sidestepped them all.

"I could almost laugh right now. My arms are heavy, but my heart is light." She dropped into a 'ready' stance. "Come, let's see how long I can last."

He lunged one last time. There was no avoiding it. Amanda's eyes went wide and she braced herself for death.

A loud ring of steel brought the world to a sudden halt. Excalibur, once so heavy and bulky to wield, became light and cold and impossibly bright. A voice, warm, rich, and deep, washed over her. “Well said. Now, take my sword and strike true.” Maen snarled and raised his paw to shield his eyes. His scream tore the air in two. The claws were missing from the tips of his fingers. He fell to his knees, clutching his bleeding hand.

“Oh?” Amanda advanced, brandishing the blade high, “Aren’t they going to grow back?” Maen looked up at her again and, for the first time, he showed a flicker of fear. Amanda crouched into a battle stance. “Come on then,” she said with a growl, “Let’s finish this.”

The exiled prince drew himself up, shattering the cracked roof and sending a rain of rubble down on Amanda. She dodged it with contemptuous ease. Strength and power filled her limbs. Excalibur shone like a star or a second sun. She would have wondered at it, but her mind had no room for any thoughts but defeating Maen and giving the others enough time.

He swiped at her again and she sliced apart another set of his claws. He screamed and reeled backwards. She didn’t give him a chance to recover. She pressed her attack, hacking, slashing, slicing at any part of him that drew near. For the first time, he retreated.

Then he stumbled. She saw her chance and stabbed him in the ankle. He fell flat on his back, bringing a good portion of the palace down around him. Amanda leapt up onto his chest and strode toward his neck. He let out a moan, but didn’t dare move. She raised the sword right above his heart.

“I underestimated you,” he said with a weak grin, “I didn’t think you could do it.” He chuckled. “I didn’t think you had true purity inside you. Are you going to kill me? Do you have it in you?”

Amanda smiled. “Oh, I don’t think this will kill you.” She stabbed down and drove Excalibur into his black heart. “But I bet it’ll hurt like nobody’s’ business.”

Maen screamed and thrashed. Amanda leapt clear. “That sword sealed you once before,” she shouted, “Now, it will do it again. But this time, no one will come to save you. You will be trapped here, alone, forever.” He groaned in reply.

A trickle of water ran by her foot. She looked down. Already, the island was almost sunk. It was time to leave. She turned and made for the door of the library. It opened for her, abandoned and undefended. But the portal shimmered, waiting for her. She breathed a sigh of relief. Good, it looks like Mike had got out.

Maen muttered something. She didn’t turn but stepped into the portal. His eyes were on her all the way. A sick grin spread over his face. He laughed, ignoring the pain. “I’m the king,” he said, “You fool. I’m the King of Avalon.”

He laughed until the water rose and swallowed him up.

* * *

Mike and Amanda stood by their parents’ grave, hand in hand. Birds chirped in the trees and green grass rolled between the headstones. A single groundskeeper swept the walk, not paying any attention to the two children. Other than that, they were alone. A rare occasion these days.

Mike swallowed and began. “Hey Mom. Hey Dad,” he said, “It’s been awhile.”

“It’s been three months,” Amanda muttered, “And two days.”

“We had an adventure, like I always wanted,” Mike continued, “Right like something out of a story. There were dragons and pirates and magic.”

Amanda cleared her throat. “We found out what you two had been doing all those years. Years you could have spent with us.” She shook her head. “Hope it was worth it.”

“We learned something too,” Mike said, “I learned adventure’s cool, but it can get in the way of more important things.”

“So can family,” Amanda muttered, “And science. You tortured a kid. He was a kid.”

Mike took a deep breath. “You really weren’t the best people. And we know why.”

They both fell silent and looked away from each other and the graves. “News is going wild,” Amanda chuckled, “Every day, it’s ‘The Implications of Magic on Society: Keep your children Safe!’ or ‘Today, Russia calls for the US to admit its secret development of magical weaponry’ or some other crazy headline.”

“We’re staying safe, though,” Mike assured them, “The king has his guards watching us every moment. Well, every moment we’re not in ‘New New Camelot’.” He chuckled. It was a ranch purchased with Fae gold, but the king insisted that it would be the site of a new, glorious beginning. “The king is not the best with names.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Hey, he’s a good cook. He can’t be everything. That would be unfair.”

“It’s a good home,” Mike said, “We have friends, people who care about us. We’re heroes now.”

“You more than me.”

“They’ll come around.” Mike pulled her into a hug. “Be patient.”

Amanda glared at the headstones. “In other words, life is going pretty well now. And we know how we’re going to live it.”

“No more settling for second best.”

“No more putting the wrong thing first.”

“So,” Mike said, “If there are any other secrets you were hiding from us, keep them buried with you. We don’t want to be drawn into your world. We’ve found a better one. And it can go with us no matter where we are.”

He turned and walked away. After a moment, Amanda followed. The groundskeeper glanced up and smiled at them as they passed. “Said whatever you needed to, then.”

Mike smiled. “Yeah. Have a good day sir.”

“You too, little fella.” The groundskeeper watched them go with a friendly smile. It vanished when they stepped out of sight. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Talisman, this is Sleeper,” he said, “Made contact with the targets. Awaiting orders.”