



Reincarnated in a Fantasy World with Murderous Intent.

A Manga-style Light-Novel

By Neil Hartley

Book 1 – Baby Steps

Version 24d

[Neil Hartley Books](#)

Credits:

Thanks to *Pra3tor* and *Supremacy28* for spotting so many typos!

Author's Intro.

I've been big into Anime recently. I mean, I've watched a bit here and there before, but just lately I've binge watched a whole metric tonne of the stuff.

And I'm impressed with the plot lines, the thought that goes into the characters, the logic in the stories. The brutality even. Stuff you don't get in 'Hollywood' movies. Of course, there's the whole Ecchi thing too, that sits quite well with me haha.

And so, naturally, it's inspired me to do something of my own. As my drawing skills are that of a half-wit five year old, I will do what I do, which is to write, in this case, a light novel.

The plan is to make this a multi-book saga. This is Book 1. Duh.

So, with no further ado, let's see how this goes, shall we?

MS - April 2024

Prologue: Death.

I glared at him from across the room.

Finally.

"Oh yes, and who are you then?"

He hadn't changed one bit. Not one single bit in the twenty years since I'd started hunting him. With his carefully tousled, shockingly white hair, handsome face, and slim figure clad in the most expensive of dark grey suits. He stood there with a slightly confused, and yet totally unconcerned expression on his face.

"You don't remember me?" I asked, stepping closer.

"Oh my goodness me, I have met a *lot* of people in my time, I can't remember even a small percentage of them." He scratched his chin and frowned slightly. "Although, there is something vaguely familiar..."

I kept a steady pace, closing the gap between us. "I've changed a lot. Lost a fair bit of weight for example." I rubbed my shaved head. "Lost hair too."

"No, still don't have it."

"I've also gained things," I went on. He was only a few metres away now. "More hatred of course, more grief, naturally, for some of the horrible things I've had to do to keep on your trail. More skills too, with weapons, fighting, killing."

"So cool."

I could tell I was beginning to bore him, but it didn't matter, I was just about in range.

"I bought this along too. It cost a pretty penny, but it will be worth it, when I slide it into your body."

One of his eyebrows raised as I pulled the wicked looking dagger out from the sheath under my jacket.

"Pretty."

"So, you still don't remember me?"

He shook his head, sadly.

"Maybe if I set the scene?" I took a deep breath, trying to force down the emotions that always came with this memory. "You're in a house. You've brutally raped and murdered my young daughter, you're just finishing off my wife, and I come in."

He paused for a second, but then his eyes lit up, and he snapped his fingers. "Yes! I remember! Oh, that was a good one! I mean, you out, cheating on your wife, leaving me to entertain them myself. And they were *both* good ones, especially your daughter. I do love the screams, mostly from the mother I make them watch. Still, all are to be savoured."

I snarled, hand tightening about my knife's hilt.

"You walked in!" He was enjoying himself now, remembering. "You simply stood and watched as I cut your wife's throat! Then I came inside her too, they do twitch so when that happens, makes it a lot more fun."

My breath was laboured, my heart hammering in my chest.

"And I left you, didn't I? I thought that would be a suitable punishment for your philandering ways, more so than just killing you there and then. That would have been too easy." He nodded, smiled,

and crossed his arms, sighing happily. "So, how have you been?"



"I told you. I've been hunting you. And now I'm going to kill you. Your death will be too easy, too fast, too painless, but that can't be helped." I raised my knife.

"Such drama. Oh very well, although I'll be annoyed to ruin this suit, in reward for your many years of determination, I'll let you have a free stab." He held his arms out wide. "How does that sound?"

"It sounds like justice," I growled. Without hesitation, I'd been itching for this moment for two decades after all, I stepped forward and plunged my dagger into the centre of his torso with all of my strength.

The sound of it penetrating his body was like music to my ears, the blade sliding in, right up to the hilt.

There was silence. I looked up, into his eyes that, whilst from afar looked bright and sparkling, were, in fact, dull and lifeless.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked.

"I..."

"You're just noticing I'm not dead, yes?" He shook his head.

"All those years and you never realised my true being. How sad. Didn't you wonder why I look the same now as back then? How I've not aged? How I've kept my youthful good looks?" A grin of perfect, white, teeth.

He leaned in close, nearly kissing me. "I'm a demon. There, there's your answer. And now, it's my turn. I have a knife too, so I think that's fair, don't you?"

I felt a sensation then, in my chest, both cold and burning at the same time, as his steel slid into me. Immediately, my body wavered, the effects not yet taking hold, but it knew, my body knew, it had just been killed.

"You can die now, I think," he said.

I smiled.

"What?" He gave me a puzzled look.

"Did you look at my dagger?" I managed to gasp, as the blood flowed from my injury, down my hand, clutching the knife, onto the hilt still protruding from his flesh.

"What?" He looked down, and then, and only then, did his eyes widen. Only then did he register something other than a smug emotion.

"Of *course* I know what you are, after twenty years hunting you, following you through..." I coughed, my body was starting to go. "Through the gutters, the depravity of your world. I said... this dagger cost me... a pretty penny."

"Blood sacrifice," he gasped.

"That... that's right," I managed to get out. "The sacrifice of one's life, the spell... on the runes on the blade... ensures that the demon is killed, fully, finally... unconditionally, killed. Expensive... but I think... I think... it's a bargain."

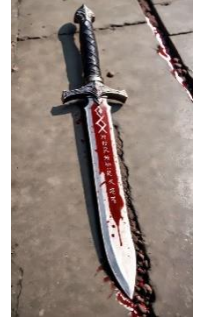
He stepped back, or staggered back, and I dropped to my knees, vision fading.

“This can’t be it!” he wailed, trying to pull the dagger out of his body. It wouldn’t budge. I was rather glad it wasn’t a fake. Big gamble that had been.

“Die... monster,” I sighed.

I have many regrets, but this, giving my life to end this demon was not one of them.

I fell forward, onto the hard stone floor, and, to the desperate wails of the monster in my ears, I finally died.



Midex.

There was applause. Well, clapping. One person clapping.

"That was really cool."

"What?"

I was alive?

No, I was... I was... I don't know what I was.

I tried to open my eyes, but, even though I could see (could I?) I didn't have eyes. (Or did I?) Sitting up was easy, because I didn't have a body either. (Perhaps?) It was hard to tell.

"Welcome!"

The voice from before. I looked(?) around, and saw, sitting in a sea of white nothing, a tall, thin man. Maybe it was a man. The face was somehow out of focus. I was fairly sure he was wearing a white suit though.

"Where am I? What's happening? Yes, yes, I know. That's what everyone asks when they come here." The person stood up and walked over to me. I found out that he was a lot taller than he first appeared, perspective seemed strange here, and he had to bend down, like an adult to a small child, to speak to me further. Shockingly, I could see his eyes. They were golden.

"You're in Midex. Well done, first Being through here in quite a lot of years. Well, if time existed here it would be a lot of years."

"Mid...?"

"Yes Midex. It's the middle of... everywhere, everything, everytime, every dimension, just... Everything. That's with a capital E. Everything there has ever been, and ever will be, whenever, wherever and so on and so forth. Don't worry about it, it's just about too much for even my mind to grasp, let alone yours. You can call me Midex too, if that makes it easier, which it probably doesn't."

"What...?"

"What happened?" Midex stood up. "You died, but hey, what a way to go, right? Killing a demon of that magnitude. *Nearly* killing him anyway. So close."

"Nearly?" I should have felt anger, but somehow, I felt nothing at all.

"He slipped away, out of the body he had, just before it failed, and ran back to where he came from, originally. Oh, don't get me wrong, you severely injured him. He's in a very weakened state. It will take years, decades, for him to recover to a decent level of power."

I should have cried then. It was all for nothing? And yet, I still felt no emotions.

"But don't worry, we were so impressed, we're going to send you after him."

"What?"

"Of course, if you don't want that, you'll be going to a Bad place. After all, you did a lot of horrible things in your life, and that includes cheating on you wife with all those women. I mean, most of them were old enough to be called women." He tapped a finger on his cheek. "Then there was all the violence and killing after." Midex shook his head and made a tutting sound. "You ended up being quite the bad man."

He looked at me and smiled brightly. At least that's the impression I somehow got, as his face was still blurry.

“So, what’s it to be? A brand new life, in a brand new place, or, well, the other.”

He knelt down and those golden eyes bored into me again. “If you ask me, it’s not really a hard decision. You could maybe make up for all those regrets. It’s a second chance! Clean slate, and so on.”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure I deserved such a thing, but then, if that bastard was still out there...

“I’ll take the second chance,” I said.

Life No.2

I opened my eyes again. And yes, this time they actually felt like eyes.

The first thing I saw, although things were a bit blurry for some reason, was a plain white ceiling above me. Framing my view were some wooden bars. I glanced left and right, and realised that I was in a baby’s cot, and the bars were just to stop a kid rolling onto the floor.

Trying to lift my head was a shock. I couldn’t! What the hell? At least my arms responded, although they felt rather different. That was because, I saw as I raised them in front of my face, they were baby arms. Baby hands.

I was a baby! I was a baby in a crib!



There was a shimmer of light above me, and suddenly a pale, no, a totally *white* face, was looking down at me with eyes of silver. As far as I could see, he was dressed in a white suit, and was totally bald.

“Midex?” I tried to say, but all that came out of my mouth was a kind of gargle.

“Hey there,” the newcomers said cheerily. “Your new body can’t really speak yet, you’re only about a day old here. And no, I’m not Midex I’m, well, technically I *am* a part of Midex, like a slice of Midex, maybe? I don’t know how to explain it. You can call me Dex though.”

“Dex,” I tried to speak again, and again, only managed a gargling baby sound.

“Don’t worry, I can hear your thoughts, but hold off with the questions for now please, they will be coming to check on you shortly, so we don’t have much time, not that they’ll be able to see me.” He shook his head. “Anyway, quick information dump for you,

so try to focus. Ready?”

Instead of trying to speak again, I waved my arms about.

“Good. Okay, firstly, you’re no longer on Earth. You’re no longer even in your old universe. You’ve passed through the Midex and are in another world where the rules are different. This is where your demon friend first came from. Probably the most important thing to note is that this is what you would call a ‘Swords and Sorcery’ world. That is, magic exists, indeed, is fairly common, here.”

Upon hearing this I kicked my feet excitedly. There had been traces of sorcery back on Earth, the dagger I’d used was imbued with some, but magic was rare indeed there, and weak. Back when I had a life, I’d been a big fan of fantasy, so the thought of actual magic was exciting. Wait! Would I be able to use it?”

“Oh yes, you’ll be able, more than able,” Dex replied to my thoughts. “In fact, you’re going to need it to defeat the demon again, when the time comes. To that end, we’ve made sure your new body is well equipped. You’ll also be stronger and faster than most.” He leaned closer. “We *want* you to succeed in this. However, and this is important, you will have to work for it. There will be many things to learn, many enemies to defeat, many friends and allies to make along the way. You will need to be in this for the long haul. Success is *not* guaranteed. Remember that.”

He straightened up again. “Of course, your previous memories of your first life will help. Initially your body will hinder and affect you a little bit, but you should quickly overcome the challenges. You won’t be at full strength until you’re older either, but that doesn’t mean you will be weak, not at all.” He wagged a finger and smiled, and then glanced to one side. “Your parents are coming, so I’ll leave you to it. Remember, strive to gain skill and power. Don’t worry about the demon for now, that will be a long way down the road.”

I heard a sound then, of voices getting close.

“I think you’ll enjoy yourself in this world,” Dex went on, with a leer. “The values here are not the same as on Earth. I think you will find them quite to your taste, the naughty fellow that you are.” He laughed then, a fairly evil laugh, and vanished.

I blinked. What did he mean by that?

Then there were two new faces above me. Nice faces. Pretty female faces! Oh, was this what he had meant? I was always a sucker for the ladies. That’s what had got me in this position in the first place.

The women were talking as one of them reached down and lifted me up.

One was a giant of a woman, with bright green hair and muscles that would make a body builder jealous. She also had the most magnificent rack, which a fairly skimpy leather top was only just managing to keep in check. Back on Earth I would have described her as Amazonian.

The second woman, who was picking me up, was almost the complete opposite. She was petite, slim and fit, with long flowing golden hair, big blue eyes, and a kind face. Totally my type, back on the old world, wearing a long white dress. She hugged me to her, and I luxuriated in the warm contact.

I was then jiggled and passed back and forth. The big woman, with hands like iron, held me high at first, which gave me a nice view down her top, then she brought me close, and I nearly smothered in that same bosom, as she kissed my head, which was pleasant. Then I was passed back to the first one.

They carried on talking, but I couldn’t understand anything they said. I guess the new body hadn’t been fitted with a translator. Oh well, I’d just have to learn the language. Back in my previous life, even before my demon hunting days, I had travelled, and even lived, in various countries, and could speak several languages, so this wouldn’t be a new thing for me.

The next I knew, I was being taken down a short corridor, and into another room, this one appeared to be a living area. It was furnished with a comfortable looking sofa, some chairs, and a fireplace, which wasn’t lit. I guess it was summer.

Only then did I remember Dex had said my parents, plural, were here, which meant I had two mothers! So, this world was okay with that kind of thing. Not a problem at all for me, I was never homophobic. Plus, both my mothers were hot!

The one holding me, the petite one, sat down and I was presented with a very nice looking breast. I guess it was because I was still a baby, but I felt no sexual desire at this point. Also, she was my mum. Also, I found, I was hungry!

So I had my first ever meal in my new life, in my new world, with my new family. Shortly after, my body did what baby bodies do, and mother number one tended to me. Maybe I should have been embarrassed, but I found I wasn't. Such is the life of a newborn.

And then my baby body took over, and I fell asleep.

~*~

The next few months were frustrating for me. I wanted to explore, I wanted to learn about this new world, about magic and sword fighting, but my baby body betrayed me, constantly falling asleep, which, of course, is what young babies do.

The time that I was awake though, I made every effort to strengthen the muscles in my body. The first time I managed to lift my head was a triumph! My other priority, learning the language, was going slightly better in some respects. I was more often than not in the same room as at least one of my mothers. It didn't take long to figure out that the slim one was Lissa, and the larger one was called Rath, which I thought a good name. In any case, they talked, of course, whilst I lay there trying to exercise.



And I found out my own name too! It took me longer than you would think, because they tended to call me pet names, like 'sweetie' and so on, but finally, when they introduced me to a visitor, I discovered my name in this life was Theodore. I quite liked the choice, although I'm sure people would call me Theo most of the time. Our family name was Helmage, which I thought sounded cool. Apparently in this world, or this country of this world, when couples married, they could choose either a name from one side or the other, or create a totally new one. This was a mixture from both my mother's names.

In any case, maybe it was my experience from my last life, maybe it was because babies pick things up quickly, or maybe a bit of both, but I very quickly learned some language. I still had trouble speaking, but at least the noises I produced were starting to sound like words.

This was commented on, both by my mothers, and by any number of visitors that dropped by, apparently to see me.

And what a selection of visitors they were too. Some were fairly old, some were men, one visited wearing what could only be leather armour, and with a sword at his side, confirming what Dex had said about this being a world of swordplay. I wondered if I would be good at that. In my last life I had, on occasion, done a bit of archery as a hobby, and was moderately skilled, but I'd never used a full on sword.

One woman who visited, a slim thing, and pretty as hell, was undoubtedly an elf. Not only that, she carried a wand! A real wand! I actually messed myself when I saw her, which I had had to get used to unfortunately, as they didn't even *try* letting me use a toilet.

A surprising number of visitors were younger, many teenagers, including many very cute girls. Even though my baby body was too immature to react, my mind was thinking lustful thoughts as I was hugged and kissed by these pretty lasses. Oh, I couldn't wait to be a teenager again!

From the language I picked up, I soon figured out that we were in some kind of institute of learning, and that at least one, probably both, of my mothers were teachers there. It was probably a senior school, maybe even a college of some sort.

The first time I was held up to look out of a window in my mother's bedroom, the sight I saw confirmed this for me.

Rath was holding me, squished against her magnificent boobies as usual, but the view held took my attention off them, for a change.

We were probably three floors up. The windows had been opened, so the view outside was clear, looking down onto some kind of massive open area. To the right the grounds had paths wandering around pleasant areas of grass, decorative flowers and small trees. People from about twelve on up strolled around, or sat on the grass. Several groups appeared to be studying, reading books, writing, talking.

To the left side though, was an open, paved, expanse. A large group of youths, I'd say about mid-teenage age, were in pairs, sparring with a variety of weaponry. Some were wooden weapons, but some, mostly the older ones, had very real, very sharp looking swords and the like. My heart beat fast just looking at them. Here was real combat!

Unfortunately, Rath didn't linger too long at the window, but what I had seen gladdened my wizened, cynical heart. I swore this time I'd take full advantage of my life, live it to the absolute fullest.

I mean, come on, who wouldn't want a do-over?

~*~

Finally I had started to make progress. I was now two, and a lot had happened in my young, second life. For a start, I knew a lot more about the environment I was inhabiting.

My mothers and I lived in the Silfen War and Magic Academy, which was located, as the name might suggest, in the Kingdom of Silfen, the furthest north of the human and demi-human lands on this continent. The reason for it being located in such a place was because, to the north, lay a mostly barren area everyone called the Badlands. Further on still was demon territory. Obviously this was of interest to me, considering my ultimate reason for being here was to hunt that son of a bitch down again.

The academy was a pretty big place, although in form, was fairly simple. Imagine, if you will, a stone wall, a huge stone wall, with living areas, classrooms, storage areas and all the other kinds of places people needed to live, inside it. Now imagine this wall built in a huge rectangle, with the courtyard I had seen from my first view outside the window in the centre. Such was the academy.

Our little apartment complex was on the north side, with the windows all facing south, into the central area. The outer wall was fortified, and barely had any views out, so we were lucky to have these. I later learned that, as both my parents were instructors, we had a slightly larger place than most.

Rath, not really surprisingly, was a combat instructor. She had carried me outside and sat me down whilst taking a lesson on a few occasions now, and I'd never seen anything like her. Her main weapon was a bastard big sword, which she wielded two handedly most of the time, but I'd also seen her use a staff, as spear, a halberd and a bow. Her title was Weapon Master, and I believed it was well deserved. According to what I overheard, she was the best overall fighter in the place, although someone else took the title for swordsman.

Lissa, on the other hand, was a Sister of the Blessed Mother. Basically, a cleric. And she had magic! My mother was a gentle soul though, and specialised in healing, with some defensive magics thrown in too. I fell sick with a fever when I was about six months old. Lissa came in, a loving smile on her face, placed her palm gently on my forehead, and muttered a prayer under her breath. Within a minute my fever had broken, and I was as good as new. I was amazed, and swore to myself then, that I would always protect her.

My language had progressed in leaps and bounds too. As soon as my baby body had developed enough, I worked on my communication skills, much to the wonder of everyone who met me, and the joy of my mothers, who took great pride in my apparent genius. I felt a bit of a fraud about that.

On the other hand, I was beginning to be known as a slightly odd kid. When I had been very young,

my baby body had cried from time to time, although not as much as a normal baby. However, now I had more control, I just didn't. And even though I made an effort, when I remembered at least, I was obviously not a normal, bubbly child. Bear in mind, I was in my fifties when I died, and it that was still mostly my mindset.

Hence some people who were closer to my parents looked askance at me.

It wasn't going to get better in that regards either, because as soon as I was able, I went hunting down books to read.

It was great relief to find the language, and the writing, was really quite simple. Their written word looked rather like runic, with each rune, sometimes two together, making a sound. In many ways it was even easier than English, which had been my main language back in my first life, as the words were spelled how they sounded. Also the grammar was simple, with no changes to past and present tense needed, just the addition of another word to signify that, if required.

I started to learn by getting my mothers to read to me every chance I could, whilst I sat on their laps and followed along. Those books were very simple, designed for a child, but this gave me a basis for the alphabet, and once I had that, I could carry on myself. Initially though, after getting the basics, I was a little frustrated. My parents were obviously not big readers, as they hardly ever had any other books around.

My luck changed though, when Myra entered my life, in several ways.

I had started crawling about early, and took every chance to scoot off somewhere, which meant my parents had to, in their opinion at least, keep an eye on me all the time, which was wearing for them. So they hired a babysitter, a young girl of about thirteen, who lived a few doors down.

Myra was cute. I drooled when I first saw her, mentally at least. She was human, petite, but with quite a nice pair of boobs on her, even at her age. When I sat on her lap, I took great pleasure in resting my head on those lovely cushions. I know, a pervert toddler. She was pretty too, with large brown eyes, a button nose and dark hair, cut short.

She was a student at the academy, but only because her father worked at the place, as an assistant or some such, so her classes were not as numerous as other students, and her family was not quite so well off. Hence the extra income earned from looking after me was welcomed by them.

Myra didn't just want to hang around our apartment, which was fine by me. I had been outside of our home a relatively few times, and out of the building, into the small town that was down the hill from the academy, only twice, so any change of scenery was welcome.

In any case, I asked her if we could visit the library, and she was more than amenable, as she had to get some books for her studies anyway.

At first she was nervous, even having got to know me a little by then, that I would make a noise, but I was no ordinary toddler of course, and all I cared about were the books. With a little nudging, I managed to get her to borrow a basic book on magic, and from then on, I was hooked.

That first day I simply read, I had to really, we were in the library. Myra was writing some sort of paper, with research from several tomes, so I was left to sit at the end of her table, on several thick books piled on a seat, with strict instructions to keep quiet.

As far as my reading had come, I still had some problems at first. I mean, there were more than a few words that I could read, but I hadn't yet learned the meaning of! Some of them I could guess, using the context, but others I wasn't sure of. In any case, I got the gist of magic fairly quickly.

In a nutshell, magic came from mana, which was exuded, usually fairly slowly and over time, by all living things. It even said the earth gave it off, but I suspected that really it was probably coming from the small, even microscopic, creatures that lived in it, and the same for water, and even the air.

In any case, to use magic, one had to channel the mana, and to do that you had to visualise the task in a certain way to create a spell. Spells were of five levels. Base, low, medium, high and ultra. Base spells were really low level things, using a tiny amount of mana, such as creating a spark, and nearly anyone could do this. However, more powerful spells needed more energy, more mana, and this is where people differed. Those with higher power, and hence higher ability, could channel more mana at once. Controlling this mana grew exponentially harder, with only a very rare mage being powerful enough to try ultra level spells, so the use of incantations was needed at some point. Usually, more powerful wizards could cast some medium levels spells without the need to incant, but beyond that, the spell usually needed to be spoken, and more powerful spells still needed hand movements too. These allowed the caster to channel the mana and shape it to their will. However, of course, these incantations meant the spell took longer to cast, and in a time critical situation, such as a battle, this could be fatal.

The book I had explained the basics of how to channel mana, and I was excited to try this. I had to hold my patience though, as I needed to wait until I was somewhere private. Even just sitting in the library had garnered a lot of puzzled looks from students and teachers passing by. It's not every day you see a two year old reading after all.

There was something I *could* try here though, something that needed no incantation or anything except concentration, and that was to actually see mana.

According to the book, this was a base ability, that most people could do to some degree, so I was confident I should be able to manage it. Essentially, you had to focus in a certain way, almost like those 'magic eye' images back in my first world. You also had to try and *visualise* the mana in a specific fashion, which the book explained.

The mana should, so I read, look like a golden mist, with stronger sources even having sparkling motes within. The more powerful the mage, the more sensitive the mana detection they should have. So, for example, a low level user would be able to detect mana from a powerful magic artefact if they tried, but a powerful user should easily be able to see mana coming off a plant.

I was no believer in god, or gods, back in my old world, but having literally passed over, and met beings of god level power, as well as having seen my mother channel energy from the Blessed Mother, I muttered a short prayer before taking a deep breath and trying to visualise the very source of magic.

For want of anything better, I focussed on Myra, who was always pleasant to look at anyway, and, as a living being, should be giving off a certain level of the stuff. Anyone with a decent level of power, so the book had said, should be able to detect it emanating from a person.

And so, I tried. I stared at her, stared *through* her, stared beyond her, let my eyes unfocus... but nothing. Then I remembered I had to visualise too! Stupid.

I did my eye thing again, and visualised.

"*Aaah!*" I wailed, and fell off my chair.

"Theo!" Myra cried, standing up and running around the table, to find me shielding my eyes and moaning. "What is it?" she asked, picking me up, simultaneously nodding and apologising to the few other people nearby for the interruption. "Didn't I tell you to be quiet? What are you doing?"

"So bright," I moaned, carefully opening my eyes a fraction. "Oh!"

The mana coming of Myra was like looking at the sun. "Your mana, so bright..."

"What? My mana? It's just a normal... oh."

She was quiet then, so much so that I tried to peep at her again, but I had to shield my eyes once more.

"You..." I could hear her muttering, but then she pulled herself together. "You need to focus on the... how do I say this? Try *seeing* less intensely. You can adjust the level of your vision if you try. Oh my, I've never heard of this before. Theo, do you understand me?"

"Y... yes," I said, trying to take in what she had said.

Okay, visualise less. Like turning down the brightness I suppose. So I did that, although it took me a minute to get my head around the concept.

Still, when I opened my eyes a crack again, Myra was no longer glowing like the sun. Instead it looked like a golden mist was coming off her, almost like she was steaming. Glints of shining light could be seen within this mana smoke too, as the book had foretold.

"Oh, that's better," I said. "Maybe I'm just a bit sensitive."

"You can see my mana?" she asked, eyes wide.

"Yes, so brightly. Are you a powerful mage Miss Myra?"

She shook her head. "No, no more than average, at best. I can detect mana from a person if I try, or more easily if they're very powerful, but it's strange..." She squinted at me. "I can't see any mana coming from you."

"What? Nothing at all?"

"No, but if you can see my mana as you said, then surely you have an amazing level of ability. I don't understand." She stood up, with me in her arms, cradled against that wonderful bosom of hers. "I'm going to speak to your mother about this, maybe she can explain."

"As you say Miss Myra," I said, resting against her chest and luxuriating in it. "Oh, please take my book back."

"Very well. Sit here a minute while I clean up." She placed me back on the chair, and began tidying her books away, whilst I took a look around at the world through my new eyes.

"The book had not been lying. Of the few other people in the room, I could see three with less mana, one with about the same, and an older man in robes, probably a teacher, who was giving off far more. So, he was probably a powerful mage. I looked down at myself, but, as Myra had said, I couldn't detect anything at all from me.

"How odd," I said to myself. Perhaps it had something to do with me being from another world. Or at least, my mind being from one.

Myra took me back to my apartment, where we found my mother Lissa in the kitchen, cooking, a pastime she enjoyed. I saw the mana streaming off her with my new vision, almost as brightly as I'd first seen it coming off Myra, and had to reduce my 'brightness' a little more, so I didn't have to squint to see her.

"Hello sweetie!" my mother said, when she saw me toddle in. "Is that another book?"

"It's a book of basic magic," Myra informed her.

"What? What are you doing, giving him that at his age?" Lissa asked her, a shocked look on her expression.

"I don't think you realise your son's ability," Myra said. She picked me up, stood me on a chair next to a table that was in the kitchen, took the book from me and opened it at a random page. "Theo, read," she ordered.

I looked at her for a moment, then at my mother, who had a bemused expression on her face, and then shrugged. She'd find out sooner or later anyway.

So I began to read the text out loud. It was a page I'd already read, so it was easier the second time. After about a paragraph, my mother let out a low scream.

"How is he doing that?" she asked Myra. "*Theo*, how can you read? You're not even three yet!"

I smiled at her. "You taught me mother," I simply said. Perhaps it was better to keep things as basic as possible.

"I... I..." Lissa stammered.

"That's not the strangest thing," Myra went on. "He can see my mana too, and not at a low level, more like... master level, possibly archmagi."

"*What?* How do you know?"

"He was reading the book, which explains it, and he looked at me and fell off his chair, he said I was too bright to look at. Me. You can see my mana, can't you Mistress?"

"Yes, I mean, I'm sorry, it's not so... Oh." My mother put her hand to her mouth as she suddenly realised the implications of what Myra was saying. "But... but he has no... I mean, I though, hoped it would manifest later, sometimes that happens. I mean, I was happy just to have a child... I..." She staggered over to the chair I was still standing on, lifted me up, and slumped down into it, sitting me on her lap.

"Oh, Blessed Mother," she said, "Please aid me now. Help me understand."

In my time with my parents, as relatively short as it had been, I had seen Lissa perform healing magic on me, so I know she had power, but what happened next would have knocked me down, had I not been sitting and held.

A bright light shone down from the ceiling, enveloping the three of us. I felt a warmth and a love, a serenity that I had never felt before, and, underlying that, a power that humbled and awed me.

"Dear daughter, your son has been sent by strange gods." The Voice was as smooth as silk, as powerful as a supernova. "His destiny will either change the world for the better, or destroy it. Guide him in My Name, until the time comes for him to set out on his own. Prepare him for hardship. Prepare him to lead, to guide, and to help those weaker, and in need. Theo, a burden greater than you were sent here for will lie upon your shoulders. Be true to your inner heart, and you will find what you seek, and more. These are my Words."

And then the light was gone.

I blinked. Well, that was something you didn't see every day.

Cup Half Full.

As you can imagine, a visit from a goddess caused quite a stir. Being the place it was, the power of the incident had been detected by many of the mages in the academy, and it was only a minute before the first of them arrived, banging on the door and demanding to know what was going on.

I sat there, on my kitchen chair, clutching my book, as a maelstrom of discussion, argument and debate went on around me, as if I were the eye of the storm. Eventually, tired, I was only two and a half remember, I crawled out of the room, unnoticed, to my bunk, climbed in, and fell asleep.

~*~

The next month I was subject to intensive examination by several professors from the magic department, all the while with my anxious parents standing next to me, to make sure I wasn't overwhelmed. To be honest, I found it more annoying than anything. The magic incantations they

used I couldn't follow yet, especially as I hadn't been left alone enough to experiment with anything. They *did* use a number of artefacts though, some of them quite powerful judging by the amount of energy they were imbued with. Finally, they sent for an expert from a magic university in a land down south, who arrived, I was most impressed to see, on an actual dragon!

"Woah," I said, peering out of the window, down at the courtyard. "Is that a real dragon mother?"

"It is son," Rath put a hand on my shoulder. "They are powerful creatures, but not impossible to beat in battle, if you are prepared."

"Have you defeated a dragon?"

"Once, when I was young and strong, and rather foolish. I wanted to show my strength, so I set out to hunt a rogue beast that was preying on livestock in a small town."

"You beat one of those? Really?"

"Yes." Her hand squeezed my shoulder for a second, as she thought of some past memory. "I wasn't totally stupid I suppose. I bought some magical potions with me, and was armed with really good weapons. Plus, I chose an ambush position. Even so, I was lucky not to get killed."

"But you won."

"Yes, I won. It came with a cost though."

I looked up at my tough mother, and saw her eyes, which were unfocussed, looking into the past with a sad expression on her face. She shook herself out of it though, and smiled down at me. "I'm sure you will grow up to be powerful enough to beat one, but if, *when* you do, please be careful not to place the lives of others in danger."

"Yes mother," I promised.

"Good boy. Oh, that must be the expert. I promise you Theodore, this will be the last one. I'm fed up with them prodding my son like a lab rat."

"Thank you," I said. I was also fed up with it.

I watched as the man who had been a passenger on the dragon spoke to a waiting mage, who gestured in our direction. The visitor, who was a tall, thin man with dark hair, and dressed in billowing tan robes, nodded, and the two set off across the yard.

Rath sighed. "Come on, let's go to the living room and wait for them."

I took her hand and toddled alongside her. Honestly, I wished I could grow up a little faster, being this young was limiting. "Patience," I said to myself. Wishing to grow up faster was something a child really would say.

Eventually the expert was shown into our living room, and to me. He was introduced as specialist research mage Alto.

At first he did what the other professors had done, which was to examine me a little like a doctor from my first world. He took my pulse, listened to my heartbeat through a stethoscope, prodded me here and there, looked at my eyes, in my ears and felt my head.

All the while he hummed, and nodded to himself.

Then he took out a kind of magnifying glass, without any glass though. He muttered a brief incantation, and a purple haze appeared where the lens would be. Through this, he squinted at me. Frowning and rubbing his chin, he dispelled the purple haze, and brought out a piece of string with a rather horrible coloured yellow stone on the end. This he held up, so the stone was hanging down, and then muttered a longer incantation. Oh, how I longed to understand the magic!

The stone sparkled with mana smoke then, which drifted towards me. The stone also swung, very slightly, in the same direction, as a piece of metal swinging towards a magnet.

“Ah ha!” Alto said, snapping his fingers. The stone stopped moving, and the mana smoke dissipated.

“What is it?” Rath asked.

Alto stood up. “How old is the boy?” he asked my mother.

“He’s two.”

“Fascinating. So long.” Alto rubbed his chin again, looked at me, then back at Rath. “He’s not full yet. That’s all it is.”

“I’m sorry?” Rath asked.

“I’ve never encountered filling at this age,” he said, more to himself, but then nodded and spoke to those present. “Very well, everyone knows that we people, all living things, exude mana,” he explained. “What people generally forget, or don’t know perhaps, is that the mana that we ‘give off’ is actually an overflow. An excess of the magic power if you will.”

“I don’t understand,” Rath said, frowning.

“Imagine that we, people I mean, are cups,” Alto went on. “These cups, we people, hold mana, but, and this is where the analogy breaks down a little bit, but bear with me, the mana in these cups slowly increases over time. Self-fills, if you will. Most people are small cups. When they are born, they hold a certain level of mana, collected from their mother over the course of the pregnancy. These cups are nearly full of this ‘mother mana’ almost as soon as they emerge into the world, so, very shortly after, they get full, and begin to overflow.”

“So they give off mana,” the university professor who had accompanied Alto translated.

“Exactly, this overflow is what you can see coming off people.” Alto held a finger up. “However, some people are larger cups. They hold more mana, and so they take longer to fill up. Sometimes, for the more powerful, this can take some months. During this time, whilst they are producing mana themselves, they also absorb mana from the atmosphere, to fill the cup, as it were. All living bodies wish to have full cups. Hence, during this time, they don’t exude mana.”

“So, you’re saying the boy’s cup isn’t full yet?” the other professor asked.

“Exactly!” Alto snapped his fingers. “It’s amazing. He’s two and he’s not full! This is archmagi levels of power we’re talking about.”

Rath stepped over and hugged me. “Is he in any danger?” she asked. “He’s not going to, I don’t know, explode or anything?”

“No, no, no, all I’m saying is that people who have so much mana inside them usually turn out to be the most powerful users of magic.” He sobered a moment, and looked at me. “He will need training though, very good training, or he may become a danger to himself and others. Such power cannot be taken lightly.”

“He’s in the right place then,” the professor said.

I listened to all of this slightly dumbfounded. It seemed that Dex hadn’t been lying when he said they had given my new body power. But if I had to be that strong, how bad was my demon target?

~*~

Despite what the Alto had told everyone, I wasn’t swept off to join magic classes on the spot. Lissa had only told Rath about my reading ability, and neither of them had told anyone else, I guess they instructed Myra to keep quiet about it as well. I’m not sure why, but perhaps they were worried I’d

get even more attention.

In any case, I was free to learn more. As long as I was careful not to draw more notice to me, I should be left alone until I was four or five, which is when students were assigned classes.

With this in mind, my first spell was the most basic one I could find. A fire lighting spell. Yes, I imagine you would say that would create attention, setting things on fire, but we had an old fashioned fireplace in our living room, as well as the large metal oven in the kitchen, which burned charcoal or wood.

I waited until Rath was out teaching, and Lissa was busy doing something in another room, and tiptoed into the kitchen. The metal door to the oven was closed, and it took me a minute to find a cloth to shield my hand and open it. It was hot after all.

Inside, the fire was smouldering. Mother Lissa had used it earlier to bake some bread, which was wonderful to eat by the way, and since then it had just died down.

Wasting no time, I took a deep breath and visualised drawing in mana. I didn't really need to do this for this spell, but I wanted to practice the art. At first I thought nothing was happening, but then I detected a kind of breeze against my skin. Altering my vision, I could see mana drifting towards me from a plant on the table. Very good.

Confident that was working, I held my hand out, pointed inside the oven and visualised with all my might the spark I wanted.

There was a roar, and a blast of heat, and I threw myself backwards as a giant flame erupted from the oven, singeing my hair.

"Oops," I said. I may have overdone it a little.

Luckily the gout of flame quickly died down, it had only supposed to be a tiny spark after all, so nothing was set ablaze. I had a few singed hairs on my head, but it wasn't really noticeable, although the burning smell was a problem. Scuttling over to the small window the kitchen had, I climbed onto a cupboard and managed to open it, to let some air in, then went back to the oven to check it was okay.

The charcoal was burning again, but other than that, it seemed all was good.

"Phew," I said to myself. I carefully closed the oven door and scuttled back to my room.

Once I was sitting on my bed, I analysed what had happened.

It was simply, I decided, a case of too much power. I needed to learn control. But this was going to be the hard part. At my age I wasn't allowed out without an escort, and even if I was allowed further afield, where would be suitable?

There was no obvious solution, so I was stuck with theory for now.

I carried on going to the library, at first with either one of my mothers or Myra, but when I turned three, they let me go alone. The staff there, amused and bemused as they first had been, soon seemed to get used to me wandering up alone and borrowing books of magic. As I always took them back to our apartment to read, I suspect they thought I was getting them for someone else.

Suited me.

And so, for the next year, I absorbed everything I could about magic. Mostly it was just spells, the theory of casting and incantations. I managed a few, very small, castings, but because of my limited freedom, there was no way I could try out everything I wanted, and the suspense nearly killed me.

That being said, all this gave me more time to think about how the magic here really worked.

Basically, using spells in this world was about channelling, and then shaping, mana, that was the first

thing I had learned. However, to shape a spell you had to, mainly, visualise what you wanted. For simple things, that was all it took, such as with my spark spell, but if you wanted more, you had to add certain information into the casting.

For example, if you wished to cast a fireball, you had to put in which direction you wanted it to go, how fast, how big and how hot it should be. These you could fairly easily visualise for a small fireball, but for more powerful ones, you needed to be more specific, or you could lose control, and it would go astray, I assumed because there was more mana involved. Until I could test these more powerful spells, I just had to guess.

Now, before I became a demon hunter in my last life, I was an IT manager, but when I was younger, I was a programmer. And this spell casting, to my mind, seemed to be like writing a simple bit of code. `Fireball_size=x` and so on.

As a result, I created any number of spells in a kind of coding manner in my head, with all the parameters already filled in, so all I had to do to cast the spell was mentally 'run' the spell incantation program, and it should activate. This was still all theory of course, as anything with this level of casting was something that a wizard would usually have to speak an incantation for, and, hence was an intermediate spell at least, none of which I dared cast in my 'imprisoned' state.

Aside from this frustration, my life was pleasant. I guess a baby doesn't really think about how comfortable and easy they have it, but from my unique perspective, I was able to appreciate being fed, and loved, by my mothers.

Rath, had she been anyone else, would have both terrified me and turned me on. She was fit as fuck, and often wore garments that would have been right at home in many manga ecchi comics. She didn't have an ounce of fat on her, and her muscles were iron, I swear. And yet, whenever she picked me up, holding me against the only soft part of her, which is to say her enormous bosom, she was gentle and kind. It was a bit of an oxymoron. It was wonderful though, being in her arms.

But as much as I grew to love Rath, I was totally smitten by Lissa. She was kind, thoughtful, clever and talented. I don't think I had ever met anyone like her, in my past life or my current one.

It seemed there was nothing she couldn't do, from cooking, taking care of me and the household, through to channelling magic from the Blessed Mother. Surely, she was the most loving person ever.

In my first life I hadn't had it so good. My father left us when I was very young, and my mother then worked herself to the bone to try and make enough to support us. I realised, later in life – too late – that she really must have loved me too, but when I was young, I just felt resentment that she was never there for me, or, when she was home, she just flaked out in bed.

One of my, *many*, regrets, is that I didn't ever get to thank her for bringing me up alone like that. She died when I was nine, and still too immature to appreciate her. Even when I was a demon hunter, after my own family was butchered, I visited her grave each year, mostly out of guilt.

So I revelled in the second chance I had been given.

Shortly after my fourth birthday, I woke up and found my parents packing things into wooden crates.

"What's happening?" I asked, not really awake. My young body still needed plenty of sleep.

"We're going home for the holidays," Lissa said, a big smile on her face.

"But we are home," I responded.

Lissa laughed, a wonderful sound. "No, this is our work place. Usually we have a long break once a year, but your mother and I, for work and other reasons, didn't take our break last year. The years before that we decided you were too young to travel. That means though, this time, we've been given nearly a year off, which is wonderful."

"Where do we live then?" I asked, rubbing my eyes, and still trying to take in this sudden move, and what impact it would have on my learning.

Lissa stopped packing and bent down to hold both my arms. "It's a small farm in El. You're going to have great fun there. There's plenty of room outside, fields, trees to climb, everything a little boy loves."

I loved to read and study magic, but this sounded nice even so. I smiled anyway, because my mother seemed so happy.

After a quick hug, Lissa stood up again. Humming, she made me some breakfast, just a bowl of porridge and a glass of milk today, and then carried on packing as I spooned it into my mouth, watching as things were tucked away into travel chests. This was a bit of a blow. I would be cut off from my books. Then the thought occurred to me that if we were going somewhere with lots of outdoor space, there may be room for me to practice my magic at last!

Cheered by that thought, I munched on my breakfast more happily, and then helped do some packing, although I think I got in the way more than anything. Still, my mothers appreciated the effort, and I managed to sneak a few books into the trunks when they weren't looking.

The move happened faster than I thought. One day we were packing things up, and the next morning, somehow, I found myself being led outside into the courtyard, to a fair sized wagon, old American-west style, hitched to two large, black, oxen.

"They're not as fast as horses, but they are stronger, and have more stamina, Rath informed me, when I toddled over to look at the giant beasts. One of them looked down at me, possibly considering how I tasted. I took a step backwards, and Rath laughed.

"Don't worry little one, they only eat plants. Still, you should not get too close, these are tame, but if they get irritated, they can be dangerous. I don't want you getting stamped on, or gored."

I nodded. The horns on the heads looked sharp and business-like.

I was then taken to the rear of the wagon, and lifted up by Rath. Lissa, already inside, helped me climb in.

I found the interior to be fairly full, but arranged in such a way that it was quite comfortable. The crates with our belongings had been stacked up and laid out so they became furniture. Blankets were laid over some to make a bed, whilst others served as seats and a table. It really was quite cosy.

"How long will we be travelling?" I asked, as I explored.

"It's going to be a good week on the road, depending upon conditions," Lissa replied. Then she squatted down in front of me and held both my hands. "Listen, this is important. We're going to be travelling through some possibly dangerous country. There is a chance of bandits, or even monsters, so you are not to wander off on your own, do you understand?"

"I promise mother," I said.

"Good boy." She patted me on the head, and then handed me a book. "Here, you can read this as we go. I found it in one of the boxes. Must have fallen in, yes?"

From the way she looked at me, I knew *she* knew that wasn't the case, but I just nodded, and widened my eyes. Lissa laughed, rustled my hair, and went to the front of the wagon. Sometimes being a cute little boy has its advantages!

Despite being given the book, I didn't settle down to read it. Instead, I scurried up to the front, to peer round Lissa. She was talking to Rath, who was standing by the oxen. I had been in the courtyard quite a few times now, but only a couple of times into the town, and never further, so I

was eager to see something of the wider world.

"Shall we then?" asked Lissa, both to Rath and myself.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands like the four year old I currently was.

Laughing, Lissa flicked on the reins, and our two bovine beasts, grunting, started moving slowly forward. Rath walked alongside.

We headed towards the main entrance, which was a defensive position, and hence consisted of a large set of gates, a portcullis, a tunnel, complete with murder holes above I noticed, where boiling oil could be poured onto any intruders, then another gate, another portcullis and a drawbridge over the moat.

The guards saluted at both of my mothers as we went by. They nodded in return.

And then we were out! The road, paved with white stone, initially weaved down towards the small town that spread over the side of the hill the academy was perched on. Shops and houses lined the sides of the road, whilst a variety of people wandered here and there. The occasional merchant or warrior on horseback made their way amongst them. My head swivelled this way and that, taking everything in.

Most of the people here, I had noticed before, were slightly dark skinned with black hair, similar to southern European countries back on earth. Made sense, this area was hot and sunny year round.

The shops lining the road had awnings out, sheltering the goods beneath, which seemed to mostly be food. Melons, oranges, some apples, many fruit I couldn't identify were on display, and I reflected that it was a little strange that, here in this world on the other side of the multiverse, they had some of the same foods as my old one. Then again, the people, or the humans at least, were also the same. Was there some link between our worlds? The elves and demi-humans here were similar to the stories back from my first life too.

As I mulled this over, I realised the heat was beating down, and sat back a little, into the shade.

"Why is it hotter out here?" I asked Lissa.

"The academy has a magical shield over it," she replied, without taking her eyes off the crowded road. "I'm surprised you didn't notice it."

"I've never looked up I guess."

"Because your nose is always in a book, you should be more aware of your surroundings."

"Valid point mother," I replied.

She looked at me then, with a bemused grin, an expression I had become used to by now. It generally happened when I said something that no three year old ever would, which was all the time really, despite me trying to act more my body's age. People would often make a remark then.

This time she just leaned over and kissed my head, which genuinely made me smile.

We made our way slowly through the town, and into an area which was mostly suburban, inasmuch as the surrounding buildings were obviously residential dwellings, a mass of sandy coloured structures, built on top of each other in a rather haphazard way. They reminded me a little of the Favela's in Brazil, although with more flowers and less gunfire.

We carried on, and arrived at the main gate of the fairly heavily fortified wall that surrounded the town. I had learned by now that we were quite close to the area called the Badlands, in which human and allied troops would often skirmish with forces from the north, an area they called the Demon lands. Bearing in mind my ultimate mission, I had resolved to do a lot more research into that part of the world.

In any case, that was for the future. Right now we stopped at the gate, where Rath chatted for a minute or so with some of the guards there. It seemed she was well known with the soldiers, although as a Weapon Master, perhaps that wasn't surprising.

Eventually we were waved through. I was slightly surprised to see the guards bow to Lissa as we went by, but was distracted from asking about that by the landscape beyond the wall.

The land stretched out as far as the eye could see. Lush green grass, interspersed with fields of crops gently waving in the wind. Here and there a windmill could be seen, sails slowly moving in the low breeze. A few figures worked the land, doing what I don't know, whilst the road ahead meandered into the distance, now made of grey stone. I could only see one or people using it.

"So Theo," Rath asked, as she jumped nimbly up onto the wagon, to sit next to me, so I was now comfortably wedged between both my mothers. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," I said, and I meant it. Perhaps it was because I'd spent the last three years mostly inside, or the last twenty or more years before that, in my old world, in the seedier parts of many cities, but the panorama ahead looked something like heaven must be, if such a place existed.

Rath ruffled my hair. "Wait until we get home, it's even nicer. You'll enjoy the farm, I'm sure."

I just nodded. Maybe I would at that.

As wonderful as the scenery was, it soon became slightly monotonous. I started to droop too. Being this young was annoying. My body still needed regular naps, and so Rath took me back into the rear of the wagon, and had me lay down in an area lined with comfortable blankets. She threw a thin sheet over me, it was still hot, and in minutes I was fast asleep.

A Cave in the Far North.

"Ahhh!" I growled in frustration. Even like this, in my natural form, the wound still hurt. It had been years now, and the injury from that accursed blade still hadn't fully healed. The fact it had been in a different body, in a different universe, didn't matter. Such were the properties of magical weapons of great power. How had the human even acquired such a thing?

The only positive in the whole matter was that the injury somehow gave me a link to the one who caused it. A little over four years ago I had actually *felt* my hated enemy enter this universe. Felt was an understatement. The pain it had caused had nearly been enough to finish me off for good. It had been a close thing. Still, it had also allowed me to begin planning my countermeasures.

"Master, are you all right?"

"Of course I'm not!" I gave my servant a backhanded slap, sending him across the floor of the cavern.

And that was another debt I had to repay. I should be in my manor house, but no, I couldn't afford for my rivals to see me in such a weakened state. My fist squeezed tight with frustration and anger.

Another minion approached, bowing low as she held a communication crystal in her claws.

"Master, the being you were expecting is trying to reach you."

I took the crystal and settled myself before tracing the activation rune. Even this tiny amount of magic hurt to use. It worked though. The flat surface of the purple stone shimmered, and a deeply hooded figure appeared. The fact I couldn't see their face actually pleased me. It meant I was dealing with someone who wasn't stupid. Had I known their identity, they would be a target after any work had been completed, to ensure secrecy.

"They have left the academy," the faceless person said. I couldn't even tell if it was male or female. In our talks before, they had just called themselves Person X.

"You know their destination?"

"We think it is to their home. They have a farm in El."

"Can you intercept?"

"We could, but I believe it would be better to wait until they return. To attack now would be to go in not fully prepared. You know who the target is travelling with, they cannot be underestimated."

"Very well. Then eliminate him on the return journey. I don't care what happens to the others, do as you please with them."

X bowed, and the link was broken.

I relaxed, and my injury ached again.

Curse Midex, it could only be that interfering god-creature. How else would the hunter have followed? At least there was an opening, a chance to eliminate the threat early. The longer I waited, the stronger he would become. Of course, the longer I waited, the more I would recover.

Even so, it would be good to get rid of the problem early.

Pleased, I signalled my servant.

"Master?"

"Bring some food and wine," I snapped. "Some of the good stuff too. I feel the good times will soon be here again!"

Travel.

The journey, as pleasant as it was, quickly turned routine. After quite some time observing the countryside, I finally opened the book that mother had given me. Sitting on the edge of the rear of the wagon, I was quite pleased to find out this was a general overview of magical concepts.

As well as a quite technical description of how mana was generated by living things – a description that used a kind of pseudo-scientific language that I couldn't follow – it included description of various fields of magic. These fields were something I had been pretty much expecting, given that this world seemed to reflect a lot of concepts we had back on old earth.

There was elemental magic, so, as you would think: Earth, fire, wind and water. There was also mind, void, spirit, and soul magic though, which the book didn't cover, saying to read about those in volume IX, which I didn't have access to. Then there was something called Transposition magic. Again, it didn't cover this in detail, but from the little it did say, I surmised this could include summoning, as well as, possibly, teleportation magic, which was an exciting thought.

To the rear of the book there were a few example spells, mostly on the basic element magics, which I'd seen before. Fireballs and so on. I had already memorised incantation programs for these. There was nothing for mind, void or soul magic, but there *was* an example of Transposition magic, and, reading this, my eyes went wide.

The spell was called Hollow Space, and was, essentially, a magic bag type spell, enabling the caster to create a hole in the interdimensional matrix, where time didn't pass. Depending upon the power of the initial casting, it could hold anywhere from five to, well, hundreds of items in a kind of stasis, although it did say living things may suffer from degradation if they stayed in there too long.

The incantation, the book went on, was actually a low level one, in terms of ease, but in reality it was classed as intermediate, because it took a lot of mana to cast. Once it had been cast though, there was no real mana needed, except a tiny, tiny amount to open and close the entrance. The larger the entrance, and separately, the larger the internal space, the more mana was needed to cast it, rising exponentially.

I read the instructions with a growing joy. It should be a simple thing for me! If only I had had this before we left, I could have taken so many more books along. Ah well, we live and learn.

Looking back into the interior of the wagon, I could make out Lissa asleep on the makeshift bed. Rath was up front, driving, or whatever you called it in an oxen drawn wagon.

The incantation for the spell was simple, so, closing my eyes and concentrating, I wrote it out in my mind, using my 'programming' method. The first try should be small, I reasoned. Keep it simple.

I scabbled back into the wagon, careful not to wake Lissa, until I found a small leather pouch I had picked up from somewhere, simply because I thought it looked like something an adventurer would hang on their belt, to keep coins in. I'd never actually used it, but it was perfect for this.

The spell had two main components to it. The size of the entrance and the capacity. For this one, I decided to make the capacity fairly small, about the size of a backpack. The purse itself was only about the size of a man's fist.

For the entrance, you had to kind of draw a magical line, which would be the size of the opening. Once the spell was done, it wouldn't open any larger than this defined size.

I readied my spell. With one last quick check to make sure Lissa was asleep, she would detect magic use if she was awake, I opened the bag and mentally started the incantation program. Holding up my index finger, I concentrated the focus on the tip, and sure enough, it glowed a bright yellow! It was working.

Heart beating ten to the dozen, I 'drew' a luminous yellow line around the fully extended opening of the purse, carefully joining the start and end points.

There was a flash, and I gasped as a sudden rush of mana drained out of me, nearly causing me to fall off the wagon.

I steadied myself. This was something I'd not experienced with my oven lighting escapade, probably because that was a basic spell, but also because I'd drawn in mana from the air around me for that. This time I had used some internally stored mana. I wondered how full my cup was now.

Still, it didn't take long for me to recover, and I examined my purse. It looked the same to me, which was slightly disappointing. However, when I opened it, I found I could reach in all the way up to shoulder. It had worked! I had cast my first real spell.

I put my new purse back inside, and suddenly came over all dizzy. Crawling up beside Lissa on the bed, I slumped down and lost consciousness.

~*~

I woke up a little while later, to see Rath was just sitting down next to me with a cup in her hand.

"Little one," she said, smiling down at me. "Did you have a nice nap?"

Sitting up I rubbed my eyes and yawned. "Yes, thank you mother."

"Would you like something to eat?"

I suddenly realised I felt starving! Was this an effect of casting a spell? "Please," I replied, nodding.

She put her cup down on a small box used as a table, which had a kind of cradle to stop it falling over, the wagon could be a bit bumpy, and scooted over to the makeshift cooker.

This, to my mind, was the equivalent of a camp stove in a world of magic. It had a pale disk of some kind of stone, as best I could figure, on a metal block. The user cast a heat spell on the pale disk, and then placed a pan on the top, which cooked things surprisingly nicely.

Lissa was, by far, the stronger magic user of my two mothers, but Rath, like many people of this world, had some ability too, perhaps more than the average citizen. I still wasn't familiar with what abilities the people outside the academy had, but from what I could infer from the books I had read, most 'normal' citizens only had a base, maybe a low level ability. I estimated Rath's ability at, perhaps, low intermediate, but I'd not seen her use magic except for day to day chores, and even then, not often, as Lissa was usually the one to do the cooking and so forth.

In any case, it was more than enough to heat the travel cooker, and it wasn't long before she placed a plate in front of me, with a sort of pancake that was popular where she had grown up, with an egg, a little meat and some greens on it.

"Would you like some tea little one?" she asked, picking up her own cup and taking a sip.

"Yes please," I said, around a mouthful of food. I really was hungry!

"Such a well mannered boy we have." Smiling, Rath made me a small cup of green tea.

I was too busy eating to thank her this time. Again, I wondered if this was an after effect of casting my spell. It had to be. Hopefully this wouldn't be the norm, or I'd have to cast another, larger Hollow Space to keep food in!

No, I decided eventually, as I polished off my meal and took a sip of tea. It must be because I, or at least my body, was still so young. Maybe even not full of mana yet. I hadn't checked myself recently for mana leakage, so I held a hand up and adjusted my vision.

Yes! I could see a very slight level of mana smoke exuding from my skin. I guessed that meant my cup was 'full'. So I was at full power now. Then again, the books said my capacity would grow over time. That was promising.

Even so, I decided that next time I cast a powerful spell I would draw energy from the atmosphere, and not use my own.

As the day wore on more small houses began to dot the side of the road, and as the sun started to sink in the sky, we entered a village.

Once again I sat at the front, next to Rath, who was holding the reins, and took in the scenery.

Here there seemed to be much less diversity in the people, which made sense. The academy took in students from all over, and the town, small as it was, had people from different countries too, to support the students and staff, as well as the standing army stationed there. This village was just a normal kind, and hence had less foreigners.

Even so, we didn't draw any real attention, other than the looks, mainly from men, that Rath, as an attractive woman, or perhaps a ferocious warrior, would usually draw.

"Shall we stay at the same inn?" Lissa popped her head out of the wagon, ruffling my hair at the same time.

"That's where I'm heading. We're nearly there."

"I'll get our stuff together then." Lissa disappeared into the back again.

"We're staying at an inn?" I asked.

"Yes little one, we usually stop here. It's the last comfortable place for a while, so make the most of it. We'll be sleeping in the wagon for most of the rest of the way."

"I don't mind."

Rath chuckled. "No, I don't suppose you do. It's a bit of an adventure for you, isn't it? I'm sorry we've kept you closed up in the school for so long. A young boy should have more room to run and play."

"I don't mind," I repeated.

"I know. You never complain. We've been blessed by the Mother with you." Rath glanced at me with her intense eyes. "When we get to the farm, I'm going to give you some beginner lessons in the sword, all right?"

"Yes mother! But..."

"But?"

"But I'm so small."

"It's never too soon to start learning the moves. I have a practice sword you can use. It may be a little large for you still, but it will do you good to exercise more. You need to build up muscle. There are times that you will need to use physical combat, not magic, in your life."

I nodded and thought about what that statement meant. This world was a brutal place, where violence, and threat of attack by bandits, or monsters, was very real. I needed to remember it wasn't old earth. Dex had said something along those lines too, although I don't think that was actually what he was talking about.

A few minutes later we turned into a walled area, through an open gate, and into a courtyard in front of a large, three storey stone building with light spilling from the many windows.

"Here we are. Come on. Rath picked me up as easily as I would pick up a mouse, and jumped nimbly down to the ground. A youth dressed in a plain grey tunic trotted up and gave her a small bow.

"Mistress Helmage, welcome back."

"Good to see you again Tom," Rath said. "We'll be staying the one night."

"Yes mistress." Tom was about to move off when Lissa walked up, carrying several bags.

Tom saw her and gave her a deep bow, much deeper than he had done for Rath. "Blessed, welcome back to our humble inn," he said, in respectful tones.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

"Thank you Tom. Please, stand. You know I don't like formality."

"As you say Blessed." Tom, despite what he had just said, straightened up, then gave both my mothers another small bow before scurrying off to take the wagon away.

This brought home to me that Lissa was a representative of the Blessed Mother, a much revered deity in these parts. This world took religion a lot more seriously, which made sense, as the gods actually existed here, and even showed up, or meddled in people's lives, and had incredible power to boot. Hence a sister of the goddess would be treated with more respect than even a powerful fighter, like Rath.

Whilst I was carried inside I mulled this over. I would have to rethink my views on the social order of this world more than I thought. I mean, I knew there were kings and nobles, and even in my last world, where the gods were simply made up, the various churches still had influence. Here the gods were very real, and wielded very real power, and no doubt social and political influence as well.

My thoughts were distracted as we entered the lobby, which was a decent size, and quite nicely decorated, with a counter in one corner. Behind this was a very attractive girl, probably no more than sixteen.

As we approached, this receptionist, seeing us, also gave a shallow but respectful bow to, first Lissa, and then Rath.

"Welcome back," she beamed and stood straight again. She really was very pretty, and once again I felt impatient to grow up some.

"Hello Rapunzel," Rath said. "Just a room for the night please."

"Oh, is this your baby?" she asked, spotting me. "How cute he is!"

I smiled. Even at this age, I was rather susceptible to flattery from pretty females it seemed.

"Thank you Rapunzel," I replied. "You are very pretty too."

"Oh!" Rapunzel put a hand over her mouth in shock. "How well he talks!"

"Yes, he certainly is something," Lissa said, in a slightly dry tone.

I just giggled. Meeting new people was fun.

~*~

Our room was a comfortable affair, with one large bed in the middle, and a small cot to the side, that the staff had pulled in especially for me.

There was no TV or anything of course, and the toilet was down the hall. It was a pretty clean one, although it was also basic, as was the one back in the academy.

We had unpacked a few things now. Of course, by we, I mean my mothers. I'd just been put on the bed and watched, and now Lissa was changing into another robe.

She had a lovely body, my mother did, but whilst I could admire it, and I did, I felt no sexual attraction still, even in my 'old man' mind. Odd, because she was certainly my type, and I was, at least I had been, a lecherous horndog back in my first life.

"Come on, let's go and get some dinner, they'll be all out at this rate," Rath said. She'd simply washed in the large bowl provided in the room, rather than changing.

"Coming, coming," Lissa replied. She slipped on her shoes and picked me up. "Shall we get some food sweetie?"

I was tired, or at least my stupid kid body was, but even so, I nodded. Hence I was carried downstairs, into a bustling room full of noise and interesting smells. It seemed the inn was busy. I saw merchants, a couple of warriors and a few others I couldn't identify. I didn't see any table free though.

"Blessed, mistress Rath, welcome." The same cute girl I'd seen at the reception early, scurried over to greet us. "I'm sorry we're so busy, we have a caravan staying here too. Let's see if we can find you a table."

"Thank you Rapunzel," Lissa replied.

It took a bit of shifting about, but some merchants were nearly ready to go, and when informed that a sister of the Blessed mother was waiting, they quickly finished up, bowing slightly to Lissa as they went by.

Safely seated at last, Rath ordered a number of things to eat and drink, and Rapunzel scurried away.

"Such a nice girl," Lissa said.

"I like her," I added.

"Oh ho, we've got a ladies man here," Rath laughed.

"Give it a few years," Lissa said, ruffling my hair as she liked to do. "She's a bit old for you yet."

"Yes mother," I said. I mentally panted at the thought.

The food was brought over. A mixture of dishes, with vegetables, meat cut into small pieces, some kind of flatbread, some small bowls of rice, and three empty plates were put in front of us. It reminded me of my time in the Far East.

A large tankard of ale and a jug of wine was also delivered, as well as a small, empty, cup for me.

"Wine or ale little one?" Rath asked me.

I looked up at her in surprise. Was she offering me alcohol? Well, I guess it was a little like medieval times here. I know Lissa and Rath boiled the water at the academy, but the water here was not necessarily safe to drink, which is why people chose wine instead. I'd never really been a wine drinker in my old life, but hey, why not?

"Wine please," I said, and watched Rath pour some into my small cup. It was a dark red colour, and I wondered if it was made of grapes.

Lissa had been putting bits of food onto my plate, and placed it before me. "Eat up," she said, gathering food for her own meal.

I had been given a spoon to eat with, but Lissa and Rath both used chopsticks. Shrugging, I scooped up a mix of meat, rice and vegetable at random, shovelled it into my mouth, and chewed. Halfway through I realised it was super spicy!

Choking, I reached for my wine, and hastily took a long drink.

"Hey, steady," Lissa said, "you'll get drunk!"

Rath though, just laughed.

I managed to eat a reasonable amount, and drink a full, albeit small, cup of wine before my body betrayed me, and I fell asleep where I sat.

~*~

I half woke up in the dark to moans and grunts. Where was I? Oh yes, the cot at the inn. What was that noise?

"Lissa..."

It was Rath, panting hard.

Oh my word! My parents were at it! Back at the academy their room had been a little away from mine, and obviously more soundproof, so I'd not heard them before.

I didn't know how to feel about this. Turned on maybe? My body was too young, but I did feel something, at least mentally. Both my mothers were hot after all, and who doesn't like a bit of girl on girl action?

Still, they were my mothers, and deserved respect and privacy.

So, despite the gasps and occasional giggle, I turned over, squeezed my eyes shut, thought of nothing at all, and eventually fell back to sleep.

~*~

The next morning, after a hearty meal of some kind of meat, I didn't ask what – sometimes you don't really need answers – we climbed aboard the wagon, or at least I was lifted onto the wagon, and we set off again.

But not before I was given a goodbye cuddle and a kiss by Rapunzel, which, had I been older, would have made me mess myself. Once again I reflected upon both the advantages and disadvantages of being a four year old child. Well, I guess it was only because my mind was old, and lecherous, I had

these thoughts. A real three year old, with a three year old mind, wouldn't be thinking how lovely her skin felt. Ah, never mind! Give it another ten years! What's ten years in the scheme of things?

So we set off again. I spent my time reading my books, napping, or simply watching the world go by. Not that there was a great deal to see really, the land was fairly uncultivated grassland, interspersed with occasional woodland. Sometimes we passed through villages, rural farming communities most of them, and the around those areas would be fields of any number of strange crops. At least strange to me.

At night my mothers would find somewhere off the track, mostly in woodland areas, hidden from the road, and we would make camp. Obviously this wasn't the first time they'd made this trip, as they seemed to know where to stop every time. On several occasions old campfire remains testified to this.

We slept in the wagon, and I had to endure their lovemaking again, which was harder to ignore in such a confined space. I did consider 'waking up' and crying, but as I never really cried usually, I thought it may be suspicious. In any case, I would feel mean, interrupting their pleasure. So I let it go, although it gave me some pretty erotic dreams, which caused my old mind and young body a bit of conflict, let me tell you.

On about the fourth day, sometime in the late morning, we pulled up. I was reading at the time, an interesting tome that was explaining how to focus your mana. Usually I wouldn't have moved, but in this case I could hear a man's voice coming from outside, so I put my book down and crawled to the front to investigate.

What I saw was a small building of grey stone by the side of the road, and an arch over the road itself. To one side Rath was speaking to a soldier. Lissa sat holding the reins, watching.

"What is happening mother?" I asked.

"We're at the border sweetie," she replied, without looking away from Rath.

"The border to where?"

"This is the border between Silfen and Reinhart," she explained. "South Reinhart to be precise. We have to pass through to get to El. Well, I suppose we could go around, but that journey would be longer and far more... inconvenient."

I was intrigued, and would have asked more, but at that moment Rath nodded to the soldier and climbed back aboard.

"Let's go," she said, nodding to the guard, who saluted in return, and then bowed to Lissa.

"My mothers are so cool," I muttered.

~*~

Reinhart, South Reinhart to be precise, seemed to be a country covered in forest. At least that was my initial impression.

Only several hours after crossing the border the road had turned from paved to hard, sandy earth, and wound its bumpy way through pretty dense woodland. Parts of the road were being encroached upon, which made me wonder about the state of local government. Maybe this land wasn't as well run as Silfen was.

Something else that made me think this was that my both Rath and Lissa seemed to be paying more attention to the surroundings, and Rath's head constantly swivelled this way and that.

"What's going on mother?" I asked Lissa, finally, after Rath jumped down and began jogging along the edge of the road, hand on sword hilt.

"The local authorities don't really have a good hold on this part of the country. Their warriors tend to be concentrated to the north, on the border, so there aren't many patrols here, and that means an increased chance of bandits or, well, other things. Listen sweetie, do me a favour would you?"

"Of course!"

"Scuttle to the back of the wagon, and keep an eye to the rear. Keep your head down though, and just peer through the cloth."

"As you say. And I will try not to fall asleep."

Lissa just patted my head. "If you do, you do. But any help would be appreciated. If you think you see or hear something, come and tell me. Don't worry, I won't be cross if it's a false alarm, better to be safe."

"I will." I patted her leg in what I hoped was a reassuring fashion, and scrambled to take a lookout position to the rear.

I put some blankets and a cushion down between two crates, then lay down on my front on it, so I could easily see out of a gap in the cloth that dangled down over the rear of the wagon.

Of course, the next thing I knew I was jerking awake as the wagon rode over a bad bump.

I'd fallen asleep! Damn. What a great lookout I was.

Rubbing my eyes, I checked the road behind us. All clear. Well, obviously we hadn't been attacked, so no harm, I guess.

Just as I thought that, Rath's face appeared in front of me, making me jump. She had come from round the side of the wagon to peer inside.

She laughed. "I see you're being diligent then."

I made a face suitable for a four year old.

"Are you hungry little one?" she carried on.

"I..." I stopped. I was hungry. How long had I been napping? "A bit."

"Very well, let's make some food, I could use a bite too." So saying, she jumped athletically on board, making the movement look so easy. I knew that, back when I was an adult, I'd have been unable to do the same.

To try and make up for my lapse, I kept watch whilst Rath rustled up an omelette on the travel stove, passing a small plate to me, along with some green tea in a cup that had a lid on, to stop the liquid sloshing out of the side as we travelled.

"Thank you." I didn't move from my lookout position, but ate where I was, spooning the food into my mouth as we travelled.

After handing some food to Lissa at the front, to eat on the go, Rath came and sat down next to me.

"Theo," she said. I knew she was serious then. She only called me by my name when she was serious. "If we are attacked, I don't want you putting yourself in danger, do you understand?"

"Yes mother."

"You will allow your mother and me to deal with anything, we're quite capable of handling any bandits, and more, if we should run into them. I want you to huddle in a corner and hide under a blanket."

"That's not a very brave thing to do."

"I know, but as smart and clever as you are, you are still only four. And it is our job to look after

you.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” She patted my head.

I understand, I thought, but that doesn't mean I will stand by if you or Lissa are in danger!

Rath finished her meal and jumped down off the back of the wagon, again, with incredible dexterity. With another smile at me, she disappeared around the side again.

Sighing, I shook my head. What parents I had. Was it Midex that had chosen them? Or was it simply fate? And were those two any different?

~*~

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, which was a relief. As the sun began to sink in the sky, Lissa took the wagon off into the woods, down a path that was barely noticeable from the road, which I guess was the point.

We trundled slowly over rough ground for a few minutes, before entering a small clearing, where we pulled up.

I climbed over the back of the wagon and sat on the edge, looking around at the trees surrounding us. Rath was doing a circuit, checking the perimeter, I guess. Lissa came into view, just as Rath finished her check.

“Looks all clear to me,” she said.

“Right, I'll put the wards up then,” Lissa replied.

“Mother! Are you going to do magic?” I asked, excitedly. I mean, I had seen her use healing before a couple of times, but nothing else.

She sighed, but then nodded and lifted me down from the wagon to stand next to her. “Very well, you can watch, but you must remain still and quiet, do you understand? I have to concentrate, make sure I don't leave an area unwarded.”

“I shall simply observe,” I replied.

For some reason, that made Rath giggle.

Shaking her head, Lissa took my hand and led me to near the edge of the clearing. Letting me go, she raised both arms and uttered a low prayer to the Blessed Mother.

This was magic, but it was a different to what I had been studying, and one reason I wanted to observe. From what I had read, divine power came from some higher (or possibly lower) being. In this case, the Blessed Mother, a very powerful deity indeed in the scheme of things.

The spell was still crafted using mana, but mana that was sent from the goddess.

I adjusted my vision, and sure enough, a haze of power had enveloped my mother. It was mana, but more of a pure white, to my eyes, than the golden type I usually observed. I guess it was holy energy.

Yet the art of casting was the same, nearly, it seemed, as Lissa's prayer became more of an incantation.

As a result, a complex circle of intertwined writing spread out from where she was standing, to cover an area about a quarter of the circumference of our clearing.

The incantation done, Lissa dropped her arms and looked carefully down, before taking my hand again and walking a quarter of the way around the edge, where she repeated the process. Once that was done, half of the perimeter was covered by her wards.

The procedure was repeated twice more, at the other two points of the compass, and glowing white runes in protective circles covered the ground all around.

"Phew, done," Lissa said, finally, wiping her brow. I realised she was sweating.

"But mother, won't the glow from the magic attract attention?" I asked. Indeed, the wards were quite bright.

Lissa looked at me, startled. "You can see them?"

"Of course. They are actually very pretty." I squinted at the marks below my feet, which slowly swirled about with a life of their own. The runes within twisted about, and made reading the actual words impossible. "I can't read them though."

"By the Blessed Mother," Lissa gasped. She picked me up, kissed my forehead, and started walking back to the wagon. "I swear you will be Archmagi someday Theo."

I giggled as she pinched my cheek.

"All good?" Rath asked, as we returned.

"The boy can see my wards, clearly," Lissa replied, putting me down. "He asked if the glow wouldn't attract attention."

Rath raised an eyebrow, but then shook her head. "Unless bandits have recruited some high level wizards, I think we'll be safe."

I shrugged. If my mothers weren't worried, then I wouldn't be.

"Now, come on, let's have some food, then bed. I've made some meat rolls."

Rath's meat rolls were delicious! I clapped my hands. It seemed I really had been blessed this time round.

~*~

We set off early the next day. Both my mothers were eager to cover as much ground as possible. As the previous day, Rath roamed around on foot around the wagon, whilst Lissa took the reins. I took my lookout post to the rear, although this time I had a book with me, which I read whilst glancing up every now and then.

We made good time, only stopping briefly for a couple of quick breaks. Lunch was taken as we travelled, leftovers from the previous night, cooked by Rath again.

I did fall asleep after that though – damn this baby body – and resolved even more to stay awake. To this end, I ran through my offensive skill spells, making sure I was ready to cast them, should the need arise.

And the need actually *did* arise.

It was probably about three in the afternoon, watches were not common here, so I wasn't really certain, when the wagon came to an abrupt halt. Looking out of the rear, all seemed clear, so I scrambled to the front to see what was going on, only for Lissa to push my head down, out of sight. I took the hint and peered very carefully around her.

Three men, all wearing worn leather armour and brandishing plain, but effective looking swords stood in our path. I couldn't see Rath anywhere, but I wasn't worried.

"You'll give us anything of value," the man in the middle was saying. He was a big chap, with dusky hair and a scar running down the entire length of his face. "If you're lucky, we'll let you walk from here."

"Oh dear," Lissa said, using one hand to push me back into the wagon. "Whatever shall I do." She hissed at me under her breath. "Get back."

Confident my mothers had this under control, I slid back to my post, and peered out, just as several shouts, and the sounds of metal on metal came from the front of the wagon. It seemed Rath had made herself known.

I peered through the cloth to scan the area behind us. It was odd no one was there, surely an ambush would include at least a few people to stop a retreat? Although the wagon was hardly something that could do a quick one eighty.

There was a horrible scream from behind me, a man's scream. A sound I was familiar with. As I said, I was no saint in my previous life. Though I was against killing, I had taken a few lives when it was unavoidable. Well, except for once...

Ah ha! There was movement on the road behind us! A tall, thin fellow, dressed in black and holding a sword in each hand had appeared from the undergrowth, and was making his way towards us.

I smiled. Excellent. Time to test my magic.

Standing up, I threw the cover back in what I felt was dramatic fashion. The man faltered for half a second, and then saw he was facing a toddler. With a grin, he leaped forward once more.

Good. That told me he was a murdering thug.

"*Concentrated Storm ball!*" I cried, holding a hand out and activating one of my more powerful spells. Well, it was a low intermediate, but I pulled in a *lot* of mana to cast it.

And yes, I need to work on the name. Working title, okay?

The explosion that erupted from my palm threw me back the length of the cabin, where I hit my head on the back of the seat Lissa was sitting on.

"Oh. Too much mana," I groaned, just before my vision faded.

Lissa.

Many children, when they are young, have fantastic ideas about what they want to do when they are older. Ask a five year old, and they will say they want to be the Hero that defeats the Devil King, or they want to be the next Archmagi. Of course, nearly all grow up live perfectly normal, productive, lives. Carpenters, farmers, maybe the lucky ones get to be adventurers or even a knight, or a mage.

I never had any doubt. From the first moment I had a cohesive thought, I knew I would be serving the Blessed Mother.

My father, when I eventually proclaimed this at age five, was torn. He was a merchant, with a thriving business, and had wanted me to take over when he was older. However, he was also aware that such a proclamation from one so young probably meant the Blessed Mother had chosen me, and it was never a good idea to go against a goddess, especially one as powerful as the Her, so his dilemma.

That ended though, with the birth of my younger brother. Now my father had someone to pass the business down to, leaving me free to follow the path destined.

We lived in Freehaven, a country run by the High Trio, three men and women who were elected by council vote on a regular basis. The country was not as big as others, but it was stable and wealthy, having a good amount of resources and land to grow food. We were by the sea, and had a strong

navy, as well as a well-run, modern army to defend our borders.

My family was decently wealthy, which meant I attended a respectable school, where I studied hard. Overall, I was a good student, and fairly popular with my peers.

Alongside that, I took to visiting our local temple, where I was immediately welcomed by the Mother Superior. No doubt she saw the mark of the Blessed on me, and knew I would be joining the order when I was a little older. I took to doing tasks around the temple, and learning how things worked, as well as a few basic prayer-incantations, all of which came very naturally to me.

One day at school, when I was about ten years old, I realised that I was looking at a new girl in our class with feelings I'd not encountered before. Others in my year had already had brief flirtations with boys, but I had never even really noticed them, despite one or two being friendly towards me.

I suddenly realised that I liked this girl in a way that most girls liked boys. And *then* it struck me that all at the temple were women. Men were not even allowed in most parts of the buildings there. In the more private areas, when I had been cleaning, I'd even seen some of the sisters holding hands.

Thus emboldened, for if the Blessed condoned it, it couldn't be wrong, I, rather shyly, approached this girl, whose name I can't even remember now. She rebuffed me quickly and decisively, and I retreated, red in the face and upset.

However, later on, as I was walking home alone, she appeared next to me. Hustling me into a small side alley where no one could see, she pinned me against the wall and treated me to my first real kiss. I thought my heart would explode! Then she grinned at me, gave my developing chest a quick grope, and ran off.

And that was how my first relationship went. We would meet in private, she was very specific about that, and fumble around, experimenting.

That lasted, maybe, six months, and then her family moved, and she left the school with barely a word. It took me a while to recover.

Recover I did though, I was still young after all. I did eventually have a proper relationship with another girl, Amanda, who was several years older than me, when I was about thirteen, just before I joined the temple. She was the one who taught me the pleasures of the flesh.

When I joined the order, we broke up. Neither of us were that upset, it had been a light and fun relationship, there was never any chance of it becoming something more, and we even remained friends.

After that, I threw myself into the routines of the temple, learning the ways of Mother, and was soon acknowledged as one who had been Chosen. As such I was given advanced training and, when I was fifteen – the age of adulthood – I was sent on my first solo mission.

It wasn't anything hard, just a routine exorcism of a young lad who was being troubled by a vengeful spirit. I dispelled the thing fairly easily, and returned to report my success. The Mother Superior simply nodded at my excitement, smiling gently. It had been a simple task of course, but to me it was a major milestone, and she was kind enough to recognise it.

So I advanced. And now I was given some weapons training too. Not enough to fight off anyone really good of course, but enough to hold my own if needed. Of course, most of the time I could use the powers granted to me by the Blessed, but as Mother Superior said, it was always good to be prepared.

I wasn't prepared really though. One day I was travelling through the land of El, to the north, when my small group was attacked by bandits. We only had a single professional fighter with us as a guard, and so it was down to me, another novice on only her second mission, and a servant to try and fight off the other two attackers.

I managed to put one down with a spell, but the other, a large man with good sword skills, quickly ran our poor servant through, and was about to take out the novice when he was attacked from behind.

Our saviour was a woman not far off my age. Right from the moment I saw her, bright green hair tied in long braids, leather armour gleaming, thrusting her shining sword deep into our ambushers body, I knew she was the one for me.

She helped fight off the other attackers, there were only two left at that point, and then, after wiping the blood off her sword on one of the bodies, approached me and gave a low bow.

"Blessed," she said. "My name is Rath, are you injured?"

"Thank you Rath," I said, with a gleam in my eye. "Sadly, our assistant has been killed." I had checked whilst the fighting was wrapping up. "However, Novice Celia and I are fine. Do you have any wounds? Please, let me heal them."

"Only a minor thing, please heal your guard first."

Blushing at such an oversight, I nodded and rushed over to our escort, who had a variety of fairly small wounds, which I healed easily. After he thanked me, I asked him to tend to our dead friend, and returned to Rath.

"Where are you injured?" I asked.

She held out her arm, which had a fairly long slash along it.

"Oh, that's quite serious," I said, shocked. She must have lost a fair amount of blood. Quickly, I called on the Blessed Mother and healed it.

"That is so much better," she said, faintly. "Could have used that trick a few times before. Oh, I need to sit..."

And so Rath joined our group as we travelled. She explained she was a freelance mercenary at a Weapon Master level of skill, which was very impressive for someone her age. I offered to pay for her escorting us, but apparently the local lord had already hired her to go after the bandits, who had been plaguing the area. Usually the local troops would have dealt with them, but El at that time was involved in skirmishes with their neighbour to the west, Reinhart, and troops were concentrated there.

Our trip lasted several days, and by the time it came to part, I was totally smitten with Rath. Having taken her into the bushes on the second day for a private talk, and then quite a few times after that, not so much for talking those times. I was fairly certain she felt the same way as I did.

So, when it came time for her to report back to the one that had hired her, I accompanied her. It wasn't far out of our way in any case, and our quest wasn't so urgent.

Once she had reported in, and collected her fee, she rejoined us for the rest of my mission, and then returned to Freehaven with us, saying that she had heard of a few mercenary jobs down there that sounded interesting anyway. Just an excuse of course, but I was very happy to hear it.

One thing led to another, and in a little over a year we were married in the temple by the Mother Superior herself.

After a short time, we decided to move north, to Rath's home in El, and from there we both managed to find positions on the Silfen Academy, which is where we decided to have a child.

Sisters of the Blessed do not lie with men, but we can still have children with our partners thanks to a special Divine prayer-incantation. Such a thing, though, does not mean that the pregnancy will be special, or even have a better chance of coming to term, and I was worried for my baby when he was born. The poor chap was weak and sickly, and we both feared he wasn't going to make it.

However, the Blessed Mother works in mysterious ways. After one day he suddenly lost all traces of ill health and became a fit, healthy and strong baby boy.

That being said, I still worried about him. Theo, as we named him, hardly ever cried. He looked at you as though he was judging you, and he learned to walk remarkably quickly. We soon realised how special he really was, after he taught himself to read! He also held conversations calmly, as if he were an adult. And then there was the whole enormous mana thing.

But even with how strange he was, he was our boy, and we both loved him with all our hearts.

Hence, when our wagon was attacked on the way home, Rath, who had heard the attackers approaching, slid into the forest and hid as they made themselves known to me.

I pushed Theo back, and told him to hide in the rear, whilst I heard their demands. They were the usual, and the thieves were no more than your basic thugs either. As much as I am not a fighter, I could have taken them out on my own fairly easily.

Still why deprive Rath of her fun? She soon came at them, and ripped through them like I knew she would.

Then, to my alarm, I detected a huge release of mana from behind! Did they have a mage with them? I turned, only to see Theo on the floor, moaning and holding his head.

"Sweetie!" I cried, leaving Rath to deal with the bandits. "What's wrong?"

"I fell and bumped my head," he moaned.

"Don't worry, we'll soon fix that." I cast a quick healing spell on him, and, once he was sitting up again, and I was sure he was all right, took a look out of the rear of the wagon. There was a fresh gash of earth running along the road, as if a giant dragon had torn it up. But other than that, nothing.

Rath poked her head in. "What happened there?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure we want to know. Are we all clear?"

My wife smiled, that gleaming white smile that I love.

"I was just warming up, and then there were none left!"

I looked back at our son, who was sitting up and muttering to himself.

"I don't think you need worry. I have a strong feeling there will be a lot more action to come."

The Journey Continues.

I never found out what happened to the man my wind spell hit. I managed to get a glance of the road behind us before we set off again, and saw a massive tear in the earth. I guess he had, literally, been blown away.

Upon reflection, I decided it had been simply a matter of too much mana. I was beginning to realise I had severely underestimated how powerful my spells could be. Perhaps if I adjusted the parameters... No, it would be better to wait and try them out some more first, so I could measure the strengths more precisely.

The rest of our journey through South Reinhart went without incident. The forest slowly cleared, and we entered a more cultivated area, not so different to what Silfen looked like, although perhaps a little rougher.

We finally arrived at a walled town. For that we had to pay a toll to the guards, I think it was a bribe

really, before we could enter. Once we did, the wagon made slow progress along streets that were far busier than those around the academy. I spent a good hour gazing at the shops and the people walking, riding, trading as we went by.

As the sun was starting to fall in the sky, we pulled into another inn. This was one a red-brick affair, built in an L shape, with a large stable off to one side.

"At last," Lissa sighed, as we pulled up. "I need a long bath."

"Me too," Rath agreed, jumping down and handing the reins to a young lass, dressed in a rather ragged tunic, who had come to greet us.

I was lifted down by Rath, and then, slightly to my surprise, Lissa spent a minute casting a very obvious, loud spell on the wagon. Frowning, I wondered what she was doing for a moment, and then I saw the girl holding the reins, looking on with an expression of terror on her face. Realisation dawned. This was theft prevention!

"There," Lissa said, in a clear voice to Rath. "That curse will make anyone rummaging through our things very sorry. Oh, I'm sorry youngster, I didn't see you there. You may take the wagon to the stables."

"Y... y... yes Blessed," the poor girl replied, visibly quaking.

Lissa gave me a quick wink, and we walked towards the inn.

"What did mother really cast?" I whispered to Rath.

"I think it was a spell to get rid of lice," she muttered back, looking down at me. "Who's a clever lad, figuring that out?"

"Mother would never hurt anyone that wasn't putting us in danger."

Rath scratched her chin, and looked up at the sky. "Maybe," she said, vaguely.

Before I could ask more, we were at the check-in desk, where an older chap in blue robes dealt with us politely and efficiently, and we were soon standing in a room that was smaller than the last one, although possibly with better furnishings.

"There's a bath house next door if I remember," Rath said, putting me on the bed. "Shall we go there before eating?"

"Most assuredly," Lissa replied, scratching herself. "Maybe I should have cast that spell on myself."

So I was treated to the bathhouse, where I was glad my young body was still, mostly, unaffected by the sight of female flesh, because my mothers took me with them, into the ladies area. I was young enough, apparently, for this to be allowed.

A changing room first, where I was efficiently stripped off, and where my mothers, in all their glory, also disrobed, swapping clothes for a towel, and then into the bathing area, which held two large, steaming pools, and one cold one.

I had to work hard not to laugh out loud with glee as we made our way through the naked females walking, relaxing, and chatting in and around these pools.

From a hulking, dark skinned, muscular woman of some species I'd not encountered here before, to a pale slip of a thing that would delight any lolicon's heart, there was a full range on display, and it was all I could do not to lose control of my bladder. I did let out an evil giggle, which I had to rapidly turn into a gurgle.

"We're going to have to keep an eye on Theo around the girls when he gets a bit older," Rath said.

Maybe I hadn't been subtle enough.

Lissa, though, just smiled at me and rubbed my hair. "You like the pretty girls sweetie?"

I couldn't trust myself to speak, so simply nodded.

"So do I," Lissa replied, waggling her eyebrows.

"Hey, I'm right here!" Rath scolded, but she was laughing.

The next half hour was either heaven or hell for me, perhaps both. I was fawned over by multiple hot babes, and I didn't know where to look next. Even at my age, it was hard to control my lower area as I was splashed, and generally played with by several really sexy females, all displaying their wonder in full and unabashed glory.

Finally, with my body tired, but certainly clean, I was pulled out by Rath, and taken back to the changing rooms, which, frankly, was almost a relief.

My stupid kid body fell asleep as I was being carried back to the hotel, but the nap didn't last too long, as Lissa gently woke me up before we went down to eat.

"Come on sweetie, unless you want to stay in the room? We can bring you some food back."

Rubbing my eyes and yawning, I shook my head. "I would like to go with you please."

And so I attended another dinner, much like the last one, although the dining room was a little less crowded. I had a small cup of ale this time, rather than the wine, but the end result was the same. My body fell asleep after having a plate of noodles, and didn't wake up until Rath was lifting me back up into the wagon the next morning.

Lissa made me a cup of broth with a steamed bun to break my fast, and I nibbled on the bread and sipped from my cup as the wagon made its way through and, eventually, out, of the gate on the opposite side of the city we had entered.

From there we had a fairly smooth ride on a well maintained road for several more days. We didn't stay in another inn, but pulled the wagon off the road, once into a layby that was designed for overnight stays, and once in a remote field. It was all very uneventful.

Finally, we arrived at the eastern border, which was much busier than the western one. There was a queue of wagons, mostly carrying goods between the two countries, and so it was late afternoon when we finally passed into El. The check had been a formality. Both Rath and Lissa were recognised, and I wondered how famous my mothers really were.

From what I had gathered, El was a reasonably prosperous kingdom, with its main exports grain, meat and other food goods. It was ruled by a young, but well educated and intelligent king. Personally, at least in my old life, I was not a fan of the monarchy system, but here, well, I guess it was back to medieval times.

So we travelled a nice country, past many fields and farms, and through a number of small hamlets and villages. The whole place seemed very rural, but also clean and organised. I was impressed.

"How far to the farm mother?" I asked Lissa, as we along.

"We should get there in another day, probably plodded about this time," she replied. "Here, do you want a biscuit?"

"Thank you," I replied, taking the proffered snack, and nibbling on it. Lissa made them herself, I knew. They tasted a little like ginger.

"Such a well mannered boy." She grinned.

"You had better rest whilst you can little one," Rath called back over her shoulder. "I shall be teaching you some sword play when we get home."

I chewed my snack as I thought through the implications of this. Did that mean I would have no free time? I had a lot of spells I desperately wanted to try.

Lissa seemed to know what I was thinking. "Don't worry," she said, ruffling my hair. "You'll have plenty of time to play. Not that you really play much." She frowned. "Are you happy Theo?"

I beamed at her. "I am very happy, thank you."

"Oh, well, good." Lissa looked a little bewildered for a second, but then smiled. "I'm glad. You know if you need to talk about anything, or you have any problems, you can always come to us, don't you? We are always here for you."

"I know. Don't worry."

That look again, but then she pulled me close and hugged me. Lissa wasn't nearly as well endowed as Rath, but I still nearly suffocated in her bosom.

Homestead.

As predicted, we arrived mid-afternoon the next day. Before we reached the farm though, we travelled through a large and busy village, where everybody seemed to know who we were.

Honestly, it probably took two hours to travel what should have taken twenty minutes, we were stopped and greeted so many times. Eventually, we pulled up outside the most impressive looking building I'd seen so far. Made of white stone, and four stories high, with a spire rising up even further than that.

My mothers picked me off the wagon and plonked me down on the cobbled street, and then Lissa knelt down, facing me, holding my hands.

"This is the Blessed Mother's temple," she told me in a serious tone. "I'm asking you to be very respectful please, Theodore. This is very important to me. Do you understand?"

"I do mother," I replied, sincerely. "I shall behave."

"Well, to be honest, I didn't expect otherwise," she laughed. "However, it was important for you to know what this place is. Come on."

Lissa stood up again, and, holding my hand, walked towards the temple.

Before we could arrive, the doors were flung open, and a stream of nuns erupted from the place.

"*Blessed!*" many of them cried, in a gleeful fashion.

Maybe I was the only one to hear Lissa sigh.

A young nun, a very attractive one I noted, ran up to Lissa and hugged her, before having to give way to several others, who did the same. I was nearly trampled underfoot, until they spotted me that is, whereupon I was mobbed in a similar fashion to when I had been in the baths, although obviously these women were clothed. I did remember though, rather sadly, that these were Blessed Mother nuns, and as such would not be interested in my manly charms, once I had developed them.

In any case, I endured, ha! Endured. I enjoyed being fawned over and cuddled, something that finally ended when an older woman, silver haired, with a stern face and a body that would be described as 'handsome' arrived on the scene.

"Sister Lissa," she said to Lissa, performing a shallow bow, as the other nuns scrambled to make space.

"Mother Superior," Lissa replied, giving a deeper bow in return. "How lovely to see you all again, it

has been too long.”

“It has indeed.” The woman nodded to Rath, who was standing a few paces behind, and then looked at me, and smiled. “And this is your son then?”

“Theodore, yes,” Lissa said. “Theo...”

I was expecting something like this, so I bowed deeply. “Blessed Mother, it is an honour.”

“Oh! How well spoken he is! How mature!” The Mother Superior exclaimed.

“He’s something all right.” Lissa looked back at Rath. “Do you want to take Theo home? I shall catch up.”

“Of course.” Rath held a hand out to me.

I gave another small bow to the nuns, which produced another bout of murmuring, and then ran back to accompany Rath back to the wagon. I didn’t often run, I reflected. I should do more of it. It was something my body number one hadn’t done in too many years, except for a few rather harrowing chases in dark alleys on occasion.

Waving to Lissa and the nuns, we set off again, making faster progress as the houses began to thin out a little. We were soon following a winding lane through well-tended fields, full of strange crops, and interspersed with large trees sporting red-orange leaves, like it was autumn.

“They are oro trees,” Rath explained, when I asked. “They are native to this part of the world and produce a delicious, sweet fruit in late summer. They can be eaten raw, or squeezed for the juice, or used in baking. Your mother makes a wonderful oro cake. Oh, I’ve missed tasting that!”

I smiled at Rath’s enthusiasm. Usually my fighting mother was quite serious, but when it came to Lissa, she was as soft as marshmallow. Which they didn’t have in this world, at least as far as I knew.

The oro trees grew thicker, although never thick enough to be classes as woodland, and so I didn’t see the farm until we rounded a corner.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Indeed it is little one. It’s taken a few years, but welcome home.”

The house was a large affair, made of white stone with wooden beams embedded, and a grey slate roof. It was sitting in a clearing, with a path leading to the front door, and surrounded by flowers.



“How beautiful,” I said.

“It is. Oh, I should have waited for Lissa. We should be coming back here together.” Rath, wiped at her eyes, uncharacteristically emotional.

Placing a hand on her knee, I leaned into her. “I’m here mother, and don’t worry, we’ll have plenty of time together.”

Sniffing, Rath smiled down at me and hugged me with one arm, nearly squeezing the life out of me in the process. “You’re such a good boy Theo, I do truly believe you are a gift from the Blessed.”

If only she knew.

~*~

The next day or so was spent settling in.

I was shown to my room, which had, apparently, been waiting for me for over a year. It had been prepared by Hungerford, the groundskeeper and general handyman, and the maid, Freia.

I fell in lust with Freia the moment I clapped eyes on her. She was probably about fifteen, petite but *really* fit, built like an Olympic gymnast. Her hair was a wild mass of orange, which she could never seem to tame. It would fly out at all angles, like a fire on her head. Her skin was very slightly tinted as well, and her eyes were dark, yet somehow not menacing.

Her personality, I was soon to find out, matched her looks. She was fierce, and never took any crap. I learned she wouldn't hesitate to give me a clip around the ear if I didn't tidy up after myself, or gave her what she called, 'lip' when speaking to her.

When I complained to Rath, my mother just laughed.

"You had better be careful around her," she said. "I took Freia on because she shows great potential with a sword. She's practically intermediate level in standard style already, and she's showing promise in Sly as well, not to mention unarmed combat."

"Maybe she's become stale though," I pointed out. "After all, you've not trained her for three years."

Rath laughed again. "No, Hungerford has been training her, so I very much doubt that."

"Hungerford?" I asked, amazed.

The reason I was so surprised is because Hungerford, whom I thought of as a rather quiet and reserved butler-type, looked rather scrawny. He must have been in his mid-fifties, and I mostly saw him pottering around, looking after the plants, or doing the odd maintenance job in the house.

"Hungerford is in charge of security," Rath went on. "And is an old acquaintance of my family. He worked for my father, may the Blessed keep him." She touched her lips in a religious gesture. "He trained me too, when I was young. Hungerford's a master in several styles of sword. In a fight I could *probably* beat him these days. He's not as young as he was, but I wouldn't put money on it."

"Hungerford could beat you?" I asked, eyes wide.

"In a sword fight. He's a Blade Master. Don't let the looks fool you. He's fast and lethal."

"Oh."

I sat back and mulled over the fact I was surrounded by incredibly dangerous people. Well, I could be dangerous too! Still, it was some comfort. This world was not the one I had first lived in. There were literal monsters in the surrounding lands, as well as bandits, and who knows what else?

In any case, Freia was certainly easy on the eyes, although I was careful not to get caught ogling her. Her temper was as hot as she was.

I was given free reign with my room, which had a small bunk, some bookshelves, a wardrobe and a table and chair set in front of one of the two windows, which looked out over the rear garden, a sprawling mass of green, with an oro tree slap bang in the middle. A round table with chairs had been placed in its shade, and I would spend many an hour sitting there, sipping juice and happily reading.

I didn't have many belongings, so my unpacking mainly consisted of retrieving my purloined books and putting them on the bookshelf. I was unsatisfied. There were only about half a dozen.

Rath was as good as her word, and on the third day woke me up early.

"Come on sleepy. From now on you're going to be training first thing. You've been spending too much time laying around reading."

"*Mother!*" I moaned. My body was still that of a child's, and it craved sleep.

"**Up!**" Rath simply pulled my bedcovers away, and rolled me roughly out of bed. I fell on the floor with a thump.

"If you are not ready by a hundred count, I shall send Freia in to dress you," she threatened, and walked out.

Whilst the thought of Freia manhandling me had its attractions, I would likely end up with several bruises, so I fairly quickly readied myself, turning up in the kitchen several minutes later, rubbing at my eyes and yawning.

"He's not even washed," Lissa said, giggling at my appearance.

"He can wash later. Eat later too," Rath said. "Come on boy, time for your first lesson."

My first lesson started off with me doing laps around the garden. Rath had Freia doing the same thing, so I didn't feel especially picked on. Mind you, I did feel quite humiliated. Freia sprinted the assigned course, lapping me countlessly, and effortlessly, whilst seemingly not even breathing heavily.

I, on the other hand, was gasping for breath. Some of that could have been down to the fact that Freia was dressed in a tiny top, and super short shorts that would have had me panting hard laying down.

"You are unfit," Rath declared, when I finally collapsed at her feet. Freia giggled, the first time I had heard her amused. I silently vowed revenge.

"Come on, that was barely even a warm up." Rath poked me with something hard, which turned out to be a tiny wooden sword, about the size of a dagger. "Here, you're too young to really spar with, but you can practice some of the basic style sequences."

So my first day of sword training went. Rath had me practice as series of set pieces with my mini-sword, over and over and over and over again.

"These need to become automatic," she chastised me, when I had the nerve to complain. "Look at her, she started off doing the same thing. Freia, show him."

Our maid who had platted her hair for this occasion, which made her look even more schoolgirl like to my filthy mind, had been doing some light sparring against Rath. Both women were using real, deadly sharp, swords. Some of the moves had been too fast for me to even see, let alone follow.

"You are standing wrong," Freia said, adjusting my limbs rather forcibly, until I was in the desired stance. "Now, hold your sword up and go through the base sequence."

I did so, and was immediately stopped and corrected.

Rath nodded and wandered off to a small hut in the corner, which, I learned, was Hungerford's special domain. The man had been leaning against the door, observing. He had been so still I'd not even noticed him until that moment. There was certainly more to the chap than first met the eye.

My attention was, abruptly, and painfully, brought back to my exercise by a sharp clip around the ear from Freia. "Watch your feet!" she shouted.

"Yes ma'am," I mumbled and tried to adjust my position, only to be corrected again.

Finally, after a great many prods and jabs from my young coach, I managed to get through the most basic sequence to her satisfaction. Upon which, I was made to do it again, and again and again.

Finally, just as I was considering casting a fireball at her, Rath came back over.

"That's enough for today Frey, thank you for your help."

"But we've only just started!" the orange maid complained.

"Please remember Theo is only four, and this is his first day to boot," Rath admonished, frowning at her, and making the girl hang her head.

"I'm sorry Master," she replied, sounding at least a tiny bit contrite. "I apologise to you too, Theodore. I forget myself sometimes."

"At least you're enthusiastic," I said, deciding to be the bigger man. She smiled at that. First smile I'd managed to elicit from the hot girl.

"Very well, Theo, go and wash and have some breakfast. You will be back out here tomorrow morning, and every morning though, so you get a good rest tonight."

"Yes mother," I replied. After a shallow bow to Freia, I turned and ran off before anyone could change their mind.

~*~

Finally, I had some free time, and some space, to practice my magic!

I had stowed my new wooden sword in my room, washed myself, eaten a breakfast that Lissa had prepared, and then run back up to my room to collect a book, which I put in a small bag I'd been given.

The first task, I decided, would be to cast Hollow Space on the bag, so it would be able to carry everything I wanted. For that, I needed somewhere private, and, just to be safe, outside.

With this in mind, I approached Lissa, who was busy cooking something in the kitchen, humming to herself. My mother loved to cook, and I guess now she was back in her own home, with her family, she was happy. This filled my heart with joy too. To have a loving family, to have support, was something that really lifted me up. If only I had had this in my first life, maybe I'd have not turned out to be such a scumbag. Ah well, this time I'd do better.

Lissa wasn't too sure about letting me wander far away, but eventually said I could go to just beyond the orchard, which was behind the house. I was not to go any further than that though, and under no circumstances was I to go north, towards the forest. It seemed that was a place that monsters roamed.

I promised I would not go further than my boundaries today (I added the 'today' purposefully!) and headed out.

Wandering through the garden, I paused for a few seconds to watch Rath and Freia sparring. Their stances and styles of swordplay, such that I could follow at least, were very different to what I had seen before, and I wondered if this was the 'Sly' style that had been mentioned. In any case, it seemed that Freia was holding her own against Rath, or maybe Rath was just holding back. I simply wasn't experienced enough to tell.

Enough swords! I was going to be a magic user first and swordsman second. Hence, I set forth again with a determined gait into the orchard.

And immediately slowed as the trees surrounded me. They smelled wonderful! The grass underfoot was soft and bouncy, and the trunks from the oro trees were picturesque beyond belief. They would certainly be hits on social media in my first life!

I carried on, running my hand over the rough bark as I went, and just savouring the atmosphere. What a beautiful place! This world was full of contradictions. Brutality and wonder, existing side by side.

Finally I emerged from the orchard, to find a stone wall blocking my way, and my view. It was tall enough for a grown adult to see over, just about, but I was a long way from that. The wall was made of rough stones though, so it was nothing for a young and energetic bodied boy to climb up and peer over the top.

Beyond the wall was rough land, heading uphill, where the trees grew ever denser. No doubt they

became the forest further along.

Satisfied there wouldn't be anyone wandering along the other side of the wall, I jumped back down and prepared my bag, remembering to take my book and a few other items out of it first. It had to be empty to cast the spell on.

Taking a deep breath, I cleared my mind and drew in mana, enjoying the feel of it flowing into my body. When I judged I had enough, I mentally 'ran' my incantation program for Hollow Space, concentrating on my fingertip, as I had before.

This time the end of my finger glowed really brightly, and I had to lower my mana sight just to be able to see. I hoped I was far enough away from Lissa that she wouldn't detect it.

Putting those thoughts aside, I traced the top of the bag I'd laid out ready, watching the glow around edge as I went along, until I'd finally joined the finish back to the start. There was a flash, and a pulse of energy, and then I was done.

I stood still for a moment, just in case I became dizzy or something, but no, I felt fine. Probably because I'd drawn mana in, and not used my own personal reserve. That was a relief.

Confident of my success, I checked out my new magic item, peering inside, which didn't really help much, as you couldn't tell how much space was in there by looking. It was just a kind of purple haze.

So I stuck my book and other bits in, and then some stones and branches, thinking it would fill up, but it didn't. I kept putting bits and bobs in, without any sign it was getting fuller!

Finally, I slumped back, to sit on the grass. I'd estimated my spell would make a bag that could hold, at most, ten items. The size didn't matter when it came to Hollow Space, as long as it could fit inside the entrance. A ring, or a tree trunk, it held a certain number of items no matter the size of each. Yet, I had put at least twenty things already, and I could tell it was nowhere near full.

How powerful *was* my magic?

New Friends.

I needed to test other spells out, including one that I simply itched to use – *Fireball*! It was a classic after all, one I had cast in role-playing-games when I was younger, back in my first life. To actually be able to cast a *real* one would be wonderous!

However, a fireball spell needed room, and lots of it, and somewhere there weren't other people. Most importantly, somewhere that wouldn't burn! I finally, reluctantly, decided it may have to wait, but that didn't mean I couldn't experiment with wind, water and earth spells. I had cast a wind one at the bandit on the road, but hadn't been able to evaluate the results, so that task was high on my to do list.

It was easier said than done. In the mornings, as threatened, Rath had me running laps and, as time went by, push-ups and other exercises, followed by sword sequence practice. Freia often oversaw this part, and as a result I tended to end up smarting from the smacks and prods after I hadn't done something right, which was all the time it seemed.

Somehow, I restrained myself from trying my fireball out on *her*, and, as the days went by, the slaps became fewer, as I started to get the hang of things.

After practice I would clean up and eat breakfast, or perhaps brunch would have been a better description, and try and get permission to wander further away, which Lissa always refused to give.

So then I would head back to my spot at the far end of the orchard and practice spells that shouldn't get me noticed.

These were mostly basic, or low level spells, which seemed very easy, although I constantly had to tone down how much power I put into them. It seemed my mana levels were much, *much* higher than the instruction books anticipated a person would have.

I tried an illumination spell, which was essentially just a light that you could make float, or stick to something. The first one I cast was about as bright as the sun, and nearly blinded me. I had to quickly dispel the thing before anyone noticed. So I tried again, with about a hundredth of the power, which produced something more like what I had in mind.

That first one I didn't bother dispelling, the illumination burned through the energy you gave it until it went out. However, when I woke up in the night to use the toilet, I happened to peer out of the window to see the glow coming from behind the orchard! It was really visible!

I had to hurriedly sneak out of the house and dash through the dark – and spooky – trees to dispel the thing! Yet again, it seemed, I had underestimated the amount of power I was putting into these incantations. It was beginning to worry me a little, I needed to have better control.

Another issue manifested about this time too. I noticed it when I was checking the mana levels produced by the trees, out of sheer curiosity. To do this I upped my 'mana vision' focus, to be able see lower levels of mana, and realised my vision was being overloaded from the glow coming from my own body!. Looking down, I could see it was streaming off me in huge quantities. I mean, like *rivers* of the stuff. Far more than I had seen coming off anyone else, even Lissa. I was slightly surprised she hadn't commented already. Maybe she just hadn't looked recently.

In any case, whilst this wasn't a problem in of itself, if I went somewhere there were plenty of magic users, perhaps like the Blessed Mother church, definitely the academy, the power of my mana would be obvious, which would attract more attention to me, as if I didn't have enough already. Whilst this may not turn out to be an issue, I would rather not stand out any more than I already did. So, how could I reduce it?

An obvious way was to use my internal mana to cast spells, rather than draw it in from outside my body. That way it would use the contents of my 'cup' somewhat, and stop me emanating until it floweth over again, as you could say.

So, I tried out casting various magics of different power. I finally figured out that if I cast a summon water spell, which created a floating ball of water, and lobbed it far away, towards the forest, my mana levels would reduce to an adequate level for the rest of the afternoon. The water, when it eventually landed, shouldn't do any real harm either, should if it landed on someone. I even managed to work out how to use more mana to heat the water a little, not to boiling, but warm. This incantation I also then used to heat the cold water in my washing bowl in the rather primitive washroom we had too. A benefit I probably wouldn't have thought of before!

Anyway, if the waterball wasn't enough, I could keep my power down a little more by casting powerful illumination spells into a hole I dug in the ground (using a minor earth moving spell of course) and then burying it so the glow wouldn't be seen.

All of these things I did in my little spot at the rear of the orchard, but I still had to restrain myself from casting anything really strong. The waterball was low intermediate. It could be used as a weapon, if I put more mana into it, and threw it at someone really hard, but I was concerned Lissa would detect anything more powerful. As it was, I had to make sure she was in the house, at least, to be really safe.

So the first month went by. My fitness level improved by really quite an astonishing degree in this time. I now could do the laps and the exercises without feeling like my legs and arms were going to

fall off, although, of course, I still couldn't keep up with Freia.

My sword work came on too, but not quite as well as I would have liked. I guess I was not such a natural, but then, I was only four still, so perhaps my own expectations were too high.

Despite the progress made, I grew more frustrated. I *really* wanted to do some more powerful spell casting! Even when Lissa went to the temple, and hence was out of detection range, I had to limit the incantations because of the potential damage they could do.

In the third month though, Lissa finally relented to my constant nagging to go further afield.

"Fine," she sighed, exasperated by my whining. "You can go as far as the baker's shop in the village, but you must *not* wander from the path between here and the village, and you are *absolutely* not to go towards the forest. Do you understand?"

"Yes mother!" I said, gleefully. At last, some open space!

"Very well. But I warn you Theodore, if I find you have disobeyed me, you will not be allowed out of my sight until we are back at the academy."

"Yes mother," I said again, as meekly as my excitement would allow.

And so, after my usual morning routine with Rath and Freia, and the following clean-up and brunch, I set off out towards the village, my bag of holding, as I had named it, over my shoulder, filled with supplies and books.

Freedom!

The path was as I remembered it, meandering through the trees and fields. Very pleasant. I even passed a local or two, who courteously doffed their hats to me as I went by. I returned their greetings with a cheery wave.

And then I arrived at the village, and stopped.

Crap!

The whole point of this endeavour was to get to a remote spot to cast some magic. Nowhere on the path had been remote at all. In fact, it was slightly worse than my usual area, because people could saunter on by at any time. At least the orchard spot was private.

Thinking things through, I decided to purchase a small cake from the bakers, which was my Lissa-allocated boundary. The baker, an incredibly large, hugely fat man with a giant beard, called me 'Young Master Theo' and insisted I take the cake free of charge, as it was my first visit. He also asked I say hello to my mothers for him, which I promised to do. No doubt trying to curry favour. Ah well.

I gave him a shallow bow, thanked him again, and left the shop, munching on the cake, which was some kind of sweet bread with a tangy almond flavour to it.

My body automatically started back up the path to home, walking up past some residential cottages on the outskirts of the village.

"Who are you?"

I blinked, coming out of my own thoughts, and looked around.

A young girl, probably my (physical) age was sitting on a garden fence, swinging her legs. She was dressed in a blue tunic and short breeches, and had dirty bare feet. Her skin was pale, and bright blue eyes stared curiously out from underneath her mass of blond hair, some of which had been tied back in multiple braids, and secured with different coloured ribbons in attempt to get it at least partially under control. She was the very definition of a cute little girl. No, not like that! Come on, she was only about four! Get your mind out of the gutter.

"Oh," I said. "I'm Theodore. Theodore Helmage."

"I'm Mary-Ann Caspian," she replied, jumping down, and holding out her hand.

"Hello Mary-Ann Caspian." I took her hand, which was slightly sticky, and shook it.

"I've not seen you here before," she said. "Would you like a lolly?" So saying, she fished about in her tunic and pulled out a small round lollypop, which looked like it had already been sucked on a fair amount. Fabric bits were stuck to it. That would explain the sticky.

"I have a cake." I waved my half eaten food at her. "Would you like to try it?"

"Yes please!"

Smiling, I handed it over. "Here, you can have it. I'm full already anyway."

"Yum!" She beamed at me and bit into the pastry. "Lovely!" she added, spitting crumbs.

I smiled at the innocent enjoyment of a young child. Yes, I know, I was also a young child, at least in theory, but *mentally* I was in my mid-fifties. I could have been her grandfather.

"Who are you talking to Anni?" another voice intruded.

I looked over to see a boy, slightly older than me, maybe five, trotting through the gate from the garden.

"His name is Theod... Thee..."

"I'm Theodore," I interjected, to stop the mouthful of pastry being lost from Mary-Ann's mouth.

"What are you feeding my sister?"

The boy stopped in front of me and glared. He was a handsome lad, dressed in a sensible shirt, matching shorts and sandals. His brown hair had been cropped, rather raggedly, short, but his eyes were the same as his sister's, bright blue.

"She offered me a lolly, which I declined, and I offered her some pastry, fresh from the bakery, which she is..." I looked at Mary-Ann's beaming, crumb plastered face. "...has eaten already. I would have offered you half. Sorry. Next time, I promise."

The boy frowned. "You should not accept food from strangers," he said, sternly, to his sister.

"You can't tell me what to do." Mary-Ann stuck her tongue out at him.

"I'll tell dad," he replied.

I smiled inwardly at this exchange between siblings. Some things, it seemed, remained the same in any universe.

"Well, it was nice meeting you both," I said. "See you again."

"Let's play together next time!" Mary-Ann shouted, waving.

"Sure!" I waved back, although the thought of playing in the dirt with toddlers wasn't all that appealing to be honest. Give her another ten years though... I allowed myself an evil grin.

~*~

So, it turned out that, despite winning my freedom from the orchard, I still had nowhere safe to practice my more powerful magics.

After another month I lost patience. My physical practice done, I washed, ate, and then told Lissa I was going to wander towards the village.

"Have a nice time," she said, waving. "Be safe, remember what I told you, and be back by dinner."

"Yes mother," I replied, as sincerely as I could.

Heh, the lack of mobile phones in this culture reminded me of being young in my first world. I had grown up before them, and the internet, and had spent quite a lot of my young childhood roaming the streets with my fellow kids. Of course, that had been back before my family totally fell apart.

In any case, this time I was going to be a 'bad boy'. I followed the path a little way down, to an area where the oro trees were thickest, and ducked between the gnarly trunks.

The season was nearly over, and overripe oro littered the grass. I found one that was still in good condition though, so picked it up, peeled it, and chewed on the juicy fruit inside as I took a long, circuitous route north, keeping to the more heavily wooded areas wherever possible.

Finally, after a good bit of walking, I found myself climbing up a steeper slope, past the cultivated fields and land, into a wilder area. Sure enough, after walking another ten minutes, I looked a little to the west and south, and saw the orchard wall from the other side for the first time. It was a little way away, so I felt secure enough that I wouldn't be spotted. I guess our house was the closest one to the wilds.

Carrying on, it started getting more overgrown, with bushes and trees growing more densely. Figuring I was far enough away, and not wanting to actually go *into* the woods, I located a relatively clear spot, and sat down on an overturned tree to rest.

"Well, this is nice," I said to myself, looking around the small glade. "First, a bite to eat."

I delved into my bag of holding, and pulled out a sandwich I'd squirreled away a few days before. The advantage of the Hollow Space spell was that it suspended time in some fashion, so things you stored inside kept fresh for as long as it was there. Amazing really.

I munched on the food, enjoying the solitude and thinking about what spell to try first.

"I think Concentrated Storm Ball needs a retry," I muttered, finally finishing my meal.

Standing up, I flexed my shoulders and grinned wildly to myself. *Finally*, I would be able to let loose! Before I could though, a noise distracted me.

Something was approaching!

Even as I thought this, a small figure burst out of the undergrowth. It saw me in shock, and stopped dead, falling back on its back.

"What the..." I frowned and stepped forward.

"KJkh jasjKD!" the thing shrieked.

"Uh?" It wasn't speaking the language I had learned! How interesting.

The creature on the ground was staring at me in an expression that was half hate, half fear.

The first, most obvious thing to note, was that she was green skinned. Light green, but definitely green. Her hair was long, flowing and also green, with spiky elf-style anime ears sticking out from her head. Un-elf-like though, were the fangs protruding from her mouth. Sharp, canine type fangs. Still small, she was obviously an infant, maybe only as old as physical me.

Her clothing was a crude tan tunic, wrapped about her body with dark twine. She had no shoes.

"It's okay," I said in a gentle tone, stopping a metre or so away from her. "I'm not going to hurt..."

More noise interrupted me.

Someone, or *something*, else was approaching. And from the sound of it, this thing was a lot bigger than my new acquaintance. It was also growling loudly. And angrily.

As another figure burst into the clearing, I now understood what my green friend had been running from.

"Is it an orc? No, more like some kind of bugbear," I muttered.

The beast, for surely it was a beast, was upright, as a person would be, but it was at least half as tall again as a fully grown adult. There was no clothing, but it was covered in matted, dirty fur. The face was a cross between a human and a wolf, with yellow, hate-filled eyes and a muzzle full of sharp teeth. At the end of the muscular arms were a mix between paw and hand, but with wicked looking claws.

With a howl of rage, it lurched forward at me.

To this day I don't know how I did it. Maybe it was because I had been thinking of casting it anyway, maybe it was the old reflexes kicking in, or maybe it was some instinct given to this body from Midex, but I held my hand out and conjured Concentrated Storm Ball with as much force as I could muster.

I was still knocked off my feet by the recoil, but I had adjusted the spell slightly, even though this was my first test, so this time I saw the effect it had.

And boy, did it have an effect.

A concentrated ball of wind was what it, essentially, was, which may not sound like much, but when I say concentrated, I really mean it. It was like compressing a tornado down to the size of a football. And that football hit the bugbear, whatever it was, in the chest. And carried right on, blasting through the creature's body in an explosion of blood, meat and bone, scattering claret and white bits over a wide area behind the impact zone.

The Concentrated Storm Ball didn't stop though. It carried on into the woodland behind, smashing its way into the undergrown and toppling at least one tree before finally dissipating.

For a few seconds, in the silence that followed, I simply lay back and panted hard. That had been intense! Then realising the small green creature was whimpering, I picked myself up off the floor and dusted myself down.

Stepping up to the green girl, I knelt down by her form. She, cautiously, uncurled from the ball she was in, slightly at least, and peered up at me with one large, amber coloured eye.

"Hi there," I said, with a smile. "My name's Theodore. What's yours?"

~*~

She gave a small shriek when I spoke, and curled up tight again. This wasn't going to be easy. Patience was the key. I sat back on my haunches and simply waited.

Eventually the ball uncurled again, and once more, the amber eye looked up at me.

"Hi," I said again, not moving.

"Sho ifaos faioj?"

"Nope, sorry, didn't catch that." I shook my head.

"SH... N... No k... kill."

"Oh! No, no I'm not going to hurt you. What am I? A monster?"

Blank stare.

"No kill."

The girl relaxed, very slightly, and sat up. Now I was gazed at, quite intently, with both of those eyes. They were really quite attractive. After a moment or two, the gaze turned to the rather bloodied remains of the bugbear thing. She gasped, hands going to her mouth, and then looked back at me.

"SKfa kjaf askjalsd assisis!" She pointed at me.

"Again, not following. However, you're welcome. Of course, it was in self-defence really, so... does that count?" I scratched my chin.

I was rewarded with a blank look. Time to move this on.

Standing up, I held out my hand.

It took a moment, but eventually her green one reached up and took it, allowing me to help her up, although, to be honest, I was nearly pulled down. She was stronger and heavier than she looked!

It turned out I was slightly shorter than she was, when she finally stood in front of me. She was quite pretty, I thought.

Shaking my head of those thoughts, I spoke again, slowly, pointing to her. "Your home. Where?"

She seemed to understand this, or maybe not, I don't know, but she pointed up, towards the forest. Great.

"Come on then, let's get you home." I nodded in the direction she indicated.

Those wonderful eyes went wide. "KS siffor afflru assss?"

"Yes, why not?" I had to assume she just asked me if I was sure.

After a puzzled look, she nodded, and walked a few steps, before stopping and looking back at me.

"Yes, coming."

She skirted the dead monster, but apart from that didn't seem squeamish about all the blood, and led me where I really shouldn't be going.

Into the woods.

Gisel.

The tiny human was following me!

I had never even *seen* one of the man-creatures before, but we all know the tales. We all know they murder and hunt our kind for fun. We all know the stories of their barbarism, of how they massacre whole tribes, women and children too, for nothing but sport.

So why had this small one not only helped me but, I had to assume from his grunts and gestures, offered to escort me home too? He must be after payment. My mind sank a little at what that could entail.

But was he really a man-creature? Maybe he was a sub-species, an elf or something. No, elves had long ears. Perhaps he was simple minded? Again, no, surely not, he had an air of intelligence about him.

Whatever he was, he was powerful. As powerful as any shaman I had ever heard of, be it goblin, man-creature or other. He had blown a hole straight through the bugbear alpha without blinking. And no incantation either! He had simply raised his hand and killed it, *like it was nothing at all!*

Maybe it was a trap? Maybe he was using me to find our camp and kill everyone there? No, that made no sense. Why would someone so powerful need to do that?

I couldn't make head nor tail of this being. Even now he was walking along as if he had no care in the world, occasionally pausing to examine a flower, or a bug on a tree trunk. It was as if he was out for a gentle stroll.

Never mind. I had survived, which was a miracle. When we returned to the tribe, my father would

know what to do. I just hoped the price would be something I could pay.

Tribe.

The green girl walked stealthy through the woods, making no sound at all. I, in comparison, felt like an elephant stamping on crackers. How interesting. Obviously she was a native to the woods, which, contrary to everything that everyone had said about them, seemed to be perfectly lovely.

A variety of plants and flowers I'd never seen before grew here, and insects skittered over the ground and the tree trunks. It seemed quite idyllic.

Then again, there had been that big ass hairy monster, which had not been in any way idyllic, so maybe I was just being naive. I looked down at my hand, flexing my fingers. Concentrated Storm Ball, silly name aside, had been an unequivocal success at least. Still needed to do something about that recoil, although maybe with slightly less power that wouldn't be an issue. I hadn't exactly been prepared.

My guide whistled suddenly, a birdsong kind of whistle. No doubt a signal.

Definitely a signal. Seconds later two more green figures stepped out from seemingly nowhere. And they were not small, or pretty. They were squat, muscular, and ferocious looking, and held crude, but very efficient looking weapons.

Realisation dawned. They were goblins!

One of them raised his sword and took a step forward, towards me. I suspect it had ill intent, but he stopped when my small friend stepped in front of me and shouted something at him.

There followed an energetic discussion, with lots of pointing and handwaving. Once a shake of a weapon at me. However, the guards, for they were surely guards, seemed to listen to the girl, because, finally, they took a step back, allowing a clear path ahead.

This was quite surprising to me. Why would they listen to someone so young? It seemed rather too enlightened for what was supposed to be a primitive race of beings. But then again, what did I know about goblin culture here? I was basing my assumptions on stories from my last world!

My young escort gestured at me, and started walking forward again. I followed, rather nervously passing through the two guards, who snarled.

And suddenly we were in a clearing, a large one, walking down a makeshift main street with large, semi-permanent tents on each side, and filled with a variety of goblins going about what I assumed was goblin daily life.

My mouth hung open as I walked next to my girl, taking in a whole village that had been hidden away from me moments ago. Surely there must be a spell around this place, to camouflage it so, otherwise I would have seen, heard and smelled, definitely smelled, the place long back.

The girl seemed to be a lot more relaxed now, back on home territory, and she even kept up a monologue, occasionally pointing at things and people as we walked along, with many an odd stare following us. She was no doubt explaining what and who things were, but of course I couldn't understand a thing. I made a resolution that that would have to be remedied.

After a good five minutes we approached a grander tent than all the others. It was blood red, much larger and decorated with an assortment of colourful feathers, stones, skulls of various types, including some human looking ones I noted, and the odd weapon.

There was another goblin guard at the entrance, leaning on a spear. He straightened up and saluted

as little miss approached, and realisation dawned. I'd rescued the daughter of someone important! Well, if you're going to rescue someone, I guess that's the way to go.

We walked into the tent, to find a kind of impromptu court going on.

Sat on a large seat at the back, was an older, fatter, goblin. He had a makeshift crown on his head, made from scrap metal, and an impressive looking sword leaning against the arm of the throne. I squinted, and sure enough, the weapon was streaming mana. A magical sword then. Cool.

Standing by his side was another old goblin, leaning on a staff and dressed in robes. That would be the court wizard, or maybe royal advisor.

And around the rest of the tent, a number of other goblins, mostly dressed in slightly finer robes than the ones outside. One of them, near the chief, was a huge beast, short he may have been, but he was as muscular as anyone I'd ever seen, and was dressed in well used, brown studded leather. On his back he carried an impressive looking sword.

General, I thought.

The girl stalked through the crowd and, rather rudely, pushed an older goblin female out of the way, to finally kneel before the throne. I, hastily, followed her example. Not the pushing, the kneeling.

The chief let out a gruff, and rather loud question, to which the girl, standing up, replied in an equally gruff tone.

Another question and answer session followed, with many glances given in my direction at one point. No doubt telling of my fearless heroism in the face of bugbear attacks.

Finally, the chief held a hand up, and gestured at the goblin advisor.

The advisor stepped forward and looked at me.

"What is your name?" he asked, in perfect, well, whatever language I spoke. Human? Common? Basic? I'd not considered this before. Anyway, I understood him.

"I'm Theodore. Theodore Helmage."

"How old are you, young human. You are human, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm four. Well, four and a half." That sounded rather childish, but what was I going to say? Four and a half plus fifty-odd from another universe?

"Four?"

The chief grunted then, and the advisor spoke in goblin language, which produced some gasps of astonishment from the watching crowd, and my girl too.

"You are only four?"

"And a half."

"And you defeated a bugbear?"

Hah! Nailed it.

"Yes." Best to keep things simple.

"With magic?"

Well, it wasn't my shining wit.

"Yes."

Another back and forth, with the chief growling out a long sentence.

The advisor replied, and there was another argument. It seemed that goblins weren't that big on

taking orders, or something.

Finally, the old guy turned back to me.

"You have saved the life of our beloved Gisel, the heir-apparent to our tribe."

"I'm just happy to help."

"The law of our land means that she now owes you a life debt."

Eh?

"What?"

"A life debt. As it is the heir apparent, such a debt is a large one indeed." The advisor glanced at the chief then went on a little more bashfully. "Ah, unfortunately, the clan doesn't have enough treasure to pay you the full worth of our beautiful heir apparent. Perhaps you would accept her hand in marriage instead?"

"I... wait. What? I'm only four," I protested.

"And a half," he reminded me.

"Even so, I'm far too young."

"It would not be until you were both of age, of course," he explained. "In the meantime, Gisel would be indentured to you as a hand maiden. She is, it goes without saying, a talented and intelligent young maiden. I'm sure any male would be very happy to have such a right hand to call upon." He gave a lecherous grin.

"Ho... how old is the fair Gisel?" I asked, trying to gain time whilst I sorted things out in my head.

"She is five. And a third."

"Oh." I scratched my head. This was a bit of a pickle. "What if I refused?"

"It would bring great shame upon the chief, and he would be forced to kill you."

"Oh dear."

"Yes."

This was silly, but perhaps I could stall for time.

"Look, really appreciate this, but I can't just show up at home with an, admittedly talented, intelligent and cute young goblin in tow. I mean, I can't even speak your language! Perhaps... could you give me time to learn to speak it at least? She can wait here, live her usual life, until I can find a way to bring her into my life. Or wait, you weren't expecting me to live here were you? That would bring a lot of unwanted attention! My mothers are both powerful and influential women."

"We don't wish trouble, of course, your solution seems acceptable. However, how will you learn our language? We have very few books. Do you? We speak, what do man-creatures call it? Monster-dialect something? I do not recall the name. However, it is common for those of us that your species label monsters. Quite hurtfully, I would add."

Well, that could be a useful skill at least.

"Very well. How about I meet regularly with Gisel, just outside the forest, and she can teach me?"

The advisor had a short discussion with both Gisel and the chief at this, with the usual amount of raised voices, before turning back to me.

"Gisel will meet you one finger past the high sun each day, if that is acceptable? She will have an escort with her, but the guard will stay back. The forest is a dangerous place after all."

"This seems fine, although I may not be able to make every day."

"Then the debt repayment must be sealed." He nodded at Gisel, who was now standing and looking at me.

Nodding back, Gisel reached under her tunic and pulled out a small, but very wicked looking curved dagger from somewhere. Had she had that all the time? Stepping close to me, she grabbed my hand, twisted it palm up, and ran the dagger across my finger.

"Ow!"

Ignoring my protest, she did the same to her own finger, and then wrapped our wounds together, saying something in Monster I couldn't follow. I gasped, as a swirl of mana circled us both briefly, before tightening around our fingers and being absorbed into the blood dripping from the cuts.

This was a magical contract!

Gisel looked at me then, smiled, a rather strained smile, and stepped back.

I looked down at my finger. There was a slight scar where the cut had been. It glowed, very slightly, when I squinted at it.

"It is done," the advisor said.

Well, this day hadn't turned out *at all* how I expected.

~*~

I was escorted back through the forest, to where I had met Gisel, and then made my way back, walking in a wide circle until I returned to the road, upon which I walked north again, which led home, arriving only slightly late for dinner.

"Did you have a nice time sweetie?" Lissa asked, as I was washing my hands.

"I did, thank you."

"And did you make any new friends?" Rath asked.

"I can say with some certainty that I did." I sat down as Lissa placed the food on the wooden table that we ate.

Both Hungerford and Freia were also welcome to eat with us, but Hungerford usually stayed in his hut. Freia *did* generally eat with us, but today it was her day off, and she was visiting friends in the village.

"The Blessed Mother herself watches over you Theo," Lissa said, sitting down. "You must show your respect. Please say a prayer to her before we eat."

"Yes mother."

I respected the goddess that gave my mother her powers, she seemed, as far as gods go, a pretty good and kind one. However, I knew my own power came from Midex, so this felt a little like betrayal for me. That being said, I never prayed to the strange being that had given me my second chance. Maybe I should?

In any case, I wanted to make my mother happy, and a prayer to the Blessed Mother wouldn't go amiss. Unlike my first world, the gods here were real, and you wouldn't want to piss them off.

Hence, I said a prayer of thanks, which pleased both Lissa and Rath, and we had a very nice dinner together, something I really appreciated in my second life.

After eating, my little body practically slumped over where I was sitting. It had been a long day, let's face it, and I ended up falling asleep before even having dessert, which was a crime against Lissa's cooking.

So, when I opened my eyes the next day, I was in my bed, dressed in my sleeping robe. As a grown man this would have been embarrassing, but I had become used to being mothered by, well, my mothers. Let's face it, I was physically still very young.

"Finally."

I jerked upright at the unfamiliar voice, and looked to my right.

Sitting on nothing at all, the strange figure I had last seen four years ago looked back at me with silver eyes.

"Is this because I didn't pray to you?"

Dex laughed, and waved a hand. "No, nothing of the sort. I don't expect that sort of thing. I mean, if you want to say a prayer of thanks sometimes, knock yourself out, it's appreciated, a bit like someone appreciates a compliment maybe, but no, I we just came to check in."

"Oh, okay."

"So, how are things going? Not that I don't know, but think of this as customer service."

"If you already know, what's the point?"

"It's the personal touch. And any feedback would be appreciated. You're the first crossover I've had in a while you know. How's the body feel? Everything where it should be? Nothing falling off?"

"I..." I shook my head. "No, it's all fine so far. Thank you. You've given me a lovely family and everything. I do appreciate it."

"Yah yah, it's all part of the package. I'm pleased with how you're managing so far by the way. Keep at it. Did you like the goblin girl? Pretty cute eh?"

I rubbed the back of my head. "Yeah, I guess so. I'm still a bit young for all that though."

"It'll come, don't worry. Just wait until you meet the elf, you're *really* going like her. Oh, and the dr... no, that's too much foreshadowing. Anyway, just thought I would say hello. There's a way to go yet, so don't get discouraged."

"I... wasn't? Why would I... Oh."

I was talking to nothing. The god creature had vanished.

"Such is my life here," I muttered, and slumped back down into bed.

~*~

I was woken again later, by Rath, as usual, for my morning training. After my exercises, and meal, once again, I asked permission to go out, which Lissa gave, under the same conditions, which I knew I would break, but what's a boy to do?

About one o'clock then, by my reckoning, which is what I figured a finger past the high sun was, I found myself back in my little clearing, sitting on the same overturned tree and waiting for a goblin.

The remains of the bugbear had been picked clean already. Some larger beast must have taken off with a chunk, as only the bottom part of the skeleton remained. A few flies buzzed around the bit of meat that still clung to the bones. At least that meant there was no great smell.

I didn't have to wait long before Gisel appeared. There was another, large and fierce looking guard with her, but as promised he kept his distance, just enough to keep an eye on us, but not be intrusive.

"Hello!" I said, cheerily, patting the wood next to me. "Please, sit."

Gisel nodded and, cautiously perhaps, did as bid.

"I bought you a bit of food, just as a gift, as I don't really have anything else to give," I carried on, trying to keep my tone light and friendly. Reaching into my bag, and rummaged around, elbow deep in it, trying to find the sandwich I had put in there earlier. "Ah, here it..."

I looked up, to see Gisela's face, staring at the bag in shock.

"Oh, haha, this?" I pulled my hand, and the food, out. "It's just a bag..."

"JSKHAKJA SKSJDA DAJS?!" Gisela said, in a loud voice.

"I... Okay, this is why I need to learn your language." Sighing, I offered her the sandwich, which, after a bit of hesitation, she took, and then, after watching me mime eating, took a bite of.

"See? Nice, right?"

She stuffed the whole thing in her mouth, chewing madly until it was all gone.

"Well, that's one way of doing it. So now, I've also prepared a few simple drawings, we can start with those..."

The first three or four days were the hardest. It took Gisela a little while to really catch on to what I was doing, and let's face it, she was not much older than me, my body I mean, and was hardly a certified teacher. Still, sometimes it's easier to learn from someone with a more simplistic approach. After all, I was only trying to learn to speak, to communicate, not study for an exam.

I had prepared pictures of various common items, using paper I had scrounged from just about everywhere, it wasn't so common in this world. I would start by pointing at the picture and getting Gisela to say what it was, and then I would write down the word underneath, as best I could. I cheated a little and used English for this, because I was more familiar with writing it than the language of this world.

And so we began to communicate, awkwardly at first, but it was surprising how fast we both learned. Gisela picked up my language as well, faster than I was learning hers, which annoyed me, until she managed to tell me that the chief's advisor was also giving her some lessons. Cheater! Well, it made our lessons go more easily.

One of the first things that Gisela asked me, once we became a little more fluent, is how I killed the bugbear.

I knew this would come up, and had thought about trying to palm off the whole thing with some excuse, but then she had seen it with her own eyes, so the cat was out of the bag already.

"Magic," I explained, after I had managed to get her to tell me the word in her language.

"Show!" She wanted an example. Well, why not? I *still* had not practised those spells I had come here for.

"Very well. Don't scared be... be scared," I said, still using her tongue.

She gave me a Look, and crossed her arms.

"What should I cast then? I had used Concentrated Storm ball on the bugbear, the second use of that against an enemy. Time for something else. Different, but similar.

Standing up, I held both hands out, palms facing, and ran the spell I had named 'Flood Blast!'

For this I used some of my own mana, I'd become used to doing this now, to keep my overflow down, as well as drawing some in from the atmosphere.

Slowly, a ball of water began to form between my palms, swirling in mid-air. I heard Gisela gasp, but was concentrating too much to look over.

Finally, when it was about the size of a football, I aimed it at a large tree a little way away, and

activated the second part of the incantation.

"Flood Blast!" I shouted, more for effect than because I needed to.

The ball of water roared away from me, knocking me back a pace or two, and blasting into the target with far more force than I thought it would have.

The tree trunk simply exploded, filling the air with sharp splinters.

Gisel shrieked as I dived to one side, knocking her to the ground and landing on top of her as lethal shards of wood flew through the air.

There was a huge noise as the top half of the tree, or the remains of it at least, came crashing to the ground, followed by silence.

Gisel grunted and, rather violently, pushed me off her. She was a lot stronger than she looked.

"Sorry," I said, sitting up and brushing myself down.

"Princess! You all right?" The guard rushed over and squatted down over her form.

"Hey, I understood that!" I said, standing up.

Gisel ignored me for a moment. She looked over at the tree and gasped. I followed her gaze, and did a bit of my own gasping.

Firstly, the part of the tree where my waterball had hit had been completely obliterated. The top of the tree was on the ground, surrounded by sawdust. However, that wasn't the full extent of the damage. For a good fifty metres further on, there was a trail of devastation. Bushes uprooted, smaller tree partially or fully knocked over, and leaves in the air, still floating slowly down.

"I guess I was trying to show off," I muttered.

Gisel and her guard had turned to me now, and were gaping, open mouthed.

"Sorry," I said, in their tongue. *"Too..."* I didn't know the word for powerful. *"...much."*

This is why I needed to practice!

~*~

Several more months went by. Most days followed the same pattern, although I was allowed a day of rest and there.

My physical prowess improved, as did my sword technique. Rath taught me a few lessons, but most were still overseen by Freia who, at least I thought, was warming to me a bit. I had less prods and slaps these days.

"You are doing well for your age little one," Rath said, one day. *"But from what I can tell, I don't think you have the natural talent to be a Weapon Master."*

"I know mother, I'm sorry."

She laughed and waved her hand. *"No, no. We each have our specialties. I am fairly sure, if you keep practicing, you will be good enough to take on most fighters at least. Now, let's try that last move again..."*

I continued my lessons with Gisel too, and both my 'Beast talk' as I'd found many people called it, and her human speech were coming along nicely. I was amazed how well I picked it up, to be honest. Maybe it's because I was still young. Youngsters tended to learn these kinds of things quite naturally.

I also took to practicing more of my powerful spells up there too, after we had done with the language, and finally began to be able to moderate the mana better. Still, the area around our little

glade was looking pretty beaten up.

Gisel asked if I could teach her some spells, and I managed to get her casting some low level incantations, which pleased her no end. It did show my lack of knowledge though, when she asked about the different kinds of magic. I only knew how to use some of the elemental ones. I still had no information about mind, spirit, void and soul magic, and only a very little of the transposition type.

Apparently void and soul would be the hardest to find out about, as Lissa had informed me they were banned forms, and refused to say anything else, which only made me want to learn about them all the more of course.

As the months went by, and summer started to fade, both Lissa and Rath began talking about returning to the academy.

This, I decided, would be a problem for me. Apart from access to more books, a good thing, it would mean that I would be restricted in my magical practice, a bad one. It would also mean my language lessons, which I had come to enjoy, would have to stop. So, I made a decision. Quite a hard decision actually, harder than I thought it would be.

One day, after dinner with Lissa, Rath and Freia, I stood up and faced my mothers.

"Hello?" Lissa said, sensing something was about to happen.

"Mother," I said to Lissa. "Mother," I said to Rath. "I have a request to make. Please hear me out."

Rath put her mug down and frowned. "Go on little one."

Freia raised an eyebrow.

"Firstly," I said. "When would I be able to start training at the academy?"

Lissa made a puzzled face, but replied. "Usually you would have started at four," she said.

"However, that is to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. Frankly, you don't need those, as you're already good enough at them."

"What about magical and combat training?" I asked.

"Magic training, for those who show talent, can start at five, but usually six, for those that show promise. Combat training usually only starts in all seriousness at six, at the earliest, although there are classes in basic techniques, which, frankly, you've probably already done." She looked at Rath, who nodded.

"Very well, it is as I thought."

"What's this about sweetie?" asked Lissa.

"When will we come back here again?" I asked.

"Now you're old enough to travel, we'll be back next summer break. Less than a year actually, as we've had extended holiday this time."

"In that case, I want to request..." I took a deep breath. "I would like to stay here until then."

"What? *Why?*" asked Lissa.

This was going to be the hard part. I had no idea how they would react.

"I can't practice my magic in the school. At least, I don't want to yet."

"What? What magic?" Rath frowned. "I know you're always reading those books, but casting magic is..." She stopped.

I was standing, in the middle of the dining area, holding my hand out, with a small ball of fire

floating over my palm.

It had taken a lot of practice to do this without me worrying about blowing the house up, but it had been worth it.

"Wh..." Lissa jumped up, whilst Rath and Freia just gasped.

"You didn't even do an incantation!" Lissa screeched.

Shit, I knew I would forget something.

"It's only a low level spell."

"Oh my." Lissa sank down on to her chair.

I waited for the explosion. It came, but not how I expected it.

"Our son's going to be an archmagi!" screamed Lissa, shaking Rath excitedly with both hands.

"He certainly seems to have the talent," Rath said, more calmly, enduring Lissa's assault.

"But... wait. If he's that powerful, shouldn't you have detected his mana flow?" Freia asked Lissa, reasonably.

"Ah yes," I said, dispelling my fireball. "About that..."

~*~

I fell asleep before the heated discussion about my request was resolved, and so when I woke the next morning, I still didn't know the outcome.

Rather nervously, I climbed out of bed, made toilet, dressed, and padded along the corridor to the kitchen where, as usual, Lissa was humming as she cooked.

"Here is my archmagi," she said cheerfully, when I wandered in. "Did you sleep well sweetie?"

"Yes, thank you mother," I replied.

Lissa wiped her hands on her apron and came over to me. She picked me up and kissed my cheek.

"We talked long and hard about what you asked last night," she said.

"And?"

"It wasn't an easy decision to make, but we decided to allow you to stay here."

"You did?"

"Your mother and I are going to miss you terribly, but we understand what you want. However, there are going to be some conditions."

"Of course."

"Firstly, whilst we are gone, Hungerford will be in charge. He has graciously accepted to be your guardian. You will listen to him, and obey him. Do you understand?"

"Yes mother," I replied, solemnly. Hungerford! I had hardly spoken to the man! He always looked so serious, although the few times we had spoken, he seemed to be fairly level headed and sensible, and, for what it was worth, had never treated me unkindly.

"And we may have to find a magic tutor for you as well, although that one may be a little hard to do, out here. We're not exactly a thriving city, with lots of mages. I am going to ask at the temple for advice."

"As you say mother."

"Good boy." Lissa hugged me tightly. "Oh, I miss you already."

"I miss you too." I hugged her back.

"Right then," she put me down and wiped her eyes. "You are expected outside for training, which, by the way, Hungerford will also be supervising whilst we are gone. I think your mother expects you to be at least intermediate Sly style by the time we get back."

I giggled. I had my doubts I could manage basic Standard, let alone intermediate Sly, but I trotted out anyway.

So, we carried on as before. Morning physical training, and then me slipping off for my language practice with Giselle, although that was going so well now, it was beginning to turn into more magic practice.

This time I wanted to try out something new. I'd been slogging my way up hill every day to our clearing, but sometimes we lost track of time, and had come back late, to be scolded by Lissa. There had to be a way to increase my travel speed. I hadn't managed to figure out how to teleport, assuming that was even possible, but when I had been playing around with some wind spells, I had had an idea. The previous day I'd worked on the incantations that I needed, and now I was eager to try them out.

"Hey!" Giselle was waiting for me. Today she was munching on a meat pie. She offered me a bite, but I declined. Still full from Lissa's meal.

"So, what is the plan?" she asked, as I dumped my bag.

"I," I stated grandly. "Am going to fly!"

"You are *what*?"

"Well, maybe not fly in the sky fly, but float? Hover? Anyway, if this works I will. First though, I have to experiment a bit."

"Very well, but be careful. I don't want to spark a war with the humans if I have to bring your broken body back."

I made a face at her, but she just grinned, a frightening expression on a being with fangs, and stepped back a few paces.

Before I had died, back on the other side of the multiverse, I had seen videos of small jets that people had attached to their arms and legs, which, when turned on, provided enough boost for them to actually fly. It looked a bit precarious, but it seemed to work. That had set me thinking. My wind spell created, well, a wind. If I could sustain concentrated jets of it, starting a small distance from my palms and the soles of my feet, I should be able to replicate the effect.

Of course, that would mean having four jets going continually, and all at once. All I had done with wind so far was blast a short, but powerful, burst of it.

Hence the first thing to do was test if I could maintain a constant flow. In theory, it shouldn't be too hard, but I wasn't sure how much mana it would take to maintain.

Bracing myself, I held my hand up, palm out, in front of me, and ran my Jet one incantation at the lowest power.

"Oh!" Giselle gasped, startled, as a steady gust of wind blew from my hand.

"How strong is it?" I asked her.

Carefully, she crept forward and put her hand into the stream.

"It's like a strong wind, but... sudiffssas." She saw I didn't understand that last word. "Small," she clarified.

Localised then.

"Very well, I'm going to slowly turn up the power. You can hold your hand there, but be ready to pull it back."

"Okay." She said this in actual English. Something she'd picked up from me when it slipped out sometimes.

Cautiously, I upped the power. At first I imagine it was probably like a hair dryer, something I should remember when I had my hair washed. Maybe I could warm the flow?

Concentrate!

Slowly the power increased, until Gisela could no longer hold her hand there, and I was struggling to push back against it. I could see a potential problem here. There was a chance I could hurt my wrist if the recoil was too strong.

I stopped the spell, and nodded. Time to up my game. This was the dangerous part.

"So?" Gisela asked.

I explained what I was going to do.

"You're even crazier than I thought!" was her measured response.

Well, maybe she was right.

Figuring the safest way to start this was not standing upright, I placed my palms on the ground, so I was in a four legged position, so to speak. Then I activated my main incantation, slowly at first, and then harder.

And flipped head over heels when my foot jets became more powerful than my hand ones.

I cut the spell and lay staring at the sky for a moment, slightly dazed. Gisela's bright amber eyes gazed down at me. "That was funny."

"I am glad one is amused."

The problem was my cowardice perhaps. My foot jets needed to be stronger than my hand ones, which would be mainly used to steer and balance. At least, that was the theory. I had forgotten this, so in my four legged start position I'd been flipped. There was nothing else but to try from standing.

"I'd get clear," I said, standing up. "And be ready to catch me."

She gave me another Look, but skipped back a few paces.

Standing legs slightly apart, with one arm in front of me, the other behind, palms down, I tried again. And I actually flew into the air! I was so shocked that I moved my hands, and was immediately thrown to the side. Losing control, I ploughed into the ground with a bone jarring impact.

"Are you all right?" Gisela rushed up to me. It was sweet how concerned she was. "I'll get in trouble if you're seriously hurt!"

I take that back.

"Sh...shaken," I said.

"Can you heal yourself, with magic?"

I shook my head. Hadn't figure that one out yet. I wasn't even sure there I had the right magic needed. I know Lissa could heal, but her spells had divine backing.

"Come on, sit up," Gisela helped me from my prone position. "You did it though! You actually flew

into the air!”

“Thank you.”

“And then you flew into the ground.” She giggled.

“I am pleased the princess is tickled.” I brushed myself down.

“Are you going to try again?”

I stood up and checked myself. A scrape here and there, and my elbow hurt. “No, I think today was enough. I need to figure out a way to keep stable.”

Gisel looked disappointed. “Okay. In that case, I need to cut our lesson short today. My father is having a meeting with the elders of another tribe, and I should be there.”

“Very well,” I said. “Give my regards to your father. I would like to visit your village again at some point too.”

“And I would like to visit yours,” she replied. “I’ve never been to a human settlement.”

“Mmm.” I scratched my chin and thought about this. “I shall see what I can do.”

~*~

My parents heading back to the academy was a fairly emotional event. It was, of course, the first time we had been parted since I had been born, and it probably hit them harder than it hit me, although I was surprised how much I missed them.

There was a kind of postal service in this world, but, as you would expect, it was not totally reliable, especially when travelling between different countries. Even so, I promised I would write.

Before they went, Hungerford had given me an ‘assessment’ alongside Rath, on my sword skills, such as they were. His opinion very much mirrored my mother’s, insomuch as I didn’t have any great natural talent for sword play, unlike Rath and Freia, but with work I should be able to reach a decent level. Enough not to be a pushover at least.

“He’s strong for one so young,” Hungerford said to Rath, as I lay on my back, panting, after he had put me through an intense workout. He had even allowed me to try and block some of his swings, (he used a stick) which I had totally failed to do, resulting in several hard wallops to my body. I would have bruises in the morning.

“And fast too,” Rath added.

“Indeed.” The thin man looked down at me. “Boy, I hear you can use magic without incantations. Is that true? And stand up when I’m speaking to you.”

I scrambled to my feet before answering. “Yes sir.”

“You may call me master.”

“Yes master.”

“Interesting. Can you cast whilst fighting? Whilst holding a sword?”

“I should be able to.”

“If he can do that,” Hungerford addressed my mother again, “perhaps we train him in the Saint style.”

“I didn’t realise you knew Saint,” Rath replied.

“There are many things you don’t know lass,” he said, but kindly. I had never heard anyone else call my mother called ‘lass’. It was strange.

"Si... master, what is Saint style?" I asked.

"It is a rare type of swordplay, where the fighter uses magical ability to enhance their speed and power, and also to hinder and obstruct the enemy. Let us see what you have boy. Come at me, and use any magic you can."

Really?

"As you say master."

I took a half step back, and then lunged forward with my blade, at the same time casting a blast of air at his face, using my flying jet spell.

Hungerford moved at an incredible speed, dodging the blast of air, and easily avoiding my sword, casually knocking it to one side and stepping in to prod me in the stomach with the end of his stick.

I doubled over, winded and gasping for breath.

"Nice try lad," he said.

"That was actually impressive," I heard Rath comment, over my wheezing.

"Indeed, when he's older and stronger, that could be a killing blow. Very well, I shall train him."

"Thank you."

"It is my pleasure. And I enjoy a challenge."

So, with me left under Hungerford's watchful eyes, my parents departed, using the same wagon we had arrived in.

"See you next summer sweetie," Lissa shouted, waving from the back of the wagon. "Be good for Hungerford! And be careful with your magic!"

"I will mother!" I shouted and waved back.

I kept waving until the wagon disappeared behind the trees, and even after that, I stood for quite a long time, just looking at the road.

Eventually I sighed. I had asked for this, but it still hurt.

Shaking my head, I turned and headed back towards the house.

Hungerford was waiting to give me my first lesson.

Return Journey.

Lissa had a quiet sob in the back of the wagon after we left the village behind. She has always been the tender hearted one, and had hidden her distress about leaving Theodore behind very well from him, but as soon as we were on our own, she went back and threw herself down on the makeshift bed. I pretended not to hear of course.

It's not that I wouldn't miss my son, but I've always been a little more pragmatic than my wife. A bit of independence from his mothers wouldn't do him any harm. And, although he would miss us too, boys his age are far more resilient than people give them credit for. No doubt he would be up to all sorts of mischief very soon.

I scratched my chin. Maybe I should have said something to him about peeping in on Freia. No, she was grown enough to deal with that herself, should she wish it. It did make me smile a little though, that our lad was already curious about the ladies. He was going to be a real pain in the ass when he was older. I couldn't fault his taste though, Freia was a very attractive lass. Had I been a bit younger,

and not with Lissa... Ah well, ifs and buts.

Lissa eventually stopped crying, I think she fell asleep actually, because it was a good hour more before I heard her moving about again. By that time we were well on our way.

"Would you like a tea?" she called out.

"Yes please love," I said. There, it was out of her system. She would be fine. Lissa was the strongest woman I had ever met. People thought I was frightening sometimes, I knew, but they didn't understand what Lissa was truly capable of, if really provoked.

"Here." I was handed a cup of green tea, in one of our lidded cups that stopped the liquid slopping over the side due to the rough road. Lissa came up and sat beside me, her own cup in hand.

"He will be fine," I said, after a few minutes.

"I know. I just miss him."

"Me too. Don't worry, it will be good for all of us. Plus..." I leaned over and gave her a kiss on the side of the face. "We get some alone time."

Lissa giggled, and slid up close. "I love you lots, you brute," she said.

"Hey, *you're* the brute!"

We both laughed as the wagon rumbled on down the road.

~*~

The journey back through El was pleasant. We made love under the stars that night, after making good progress, and I woke with Lissa in my arms, a warm cushion by my side.

Things carried on well into South Reinhart. The guards at the border gave us the latest information on the roads, which was that bandit activity seemed to be quiet just now. However, that didn't mean we shouldn't be vigilant. The civil war between the south and north of the country had been at a stalemate for years, but sometimes things flared up suddenly, and reserve troops were called to the front, and during those times bandit activity peaked, and monster encounters also increased.

In any case, our journey through most of Reinhart went smoothly, with no surprises, pleasant or unpleasant. There was a stroke of bad luck as we were finally getting close to the border of Silfen though. The wagon hit a rock, and one of the wheels came loose from the axle. We had to stop to do some makeshift repairs, which was tiring and time consuming.

"There," I said, finally, as I handed the mallet back to Lissa to put away. "That should hold until we're over the border at least."

"We're behind schedule though," she replied, looking at the sky. "We won't make it to our usual camping spot by evening."

"We'll just have to find somewhere else. Let's keep our eyes open for somewhere suitable, even if we have to stop a bit earlier."

Which turned out to be lucky for us.

I was jogging along, just inside the forest by the road, as was our practice in this area. As we were trying to find somewhere to camp I was ranging further in front than was usual, moving stealthily through the woods. And because I was, I saw the man in the tree before the wagon came into range. Immediately I froze, and scanned the rest of the area, at the same time pulling out my sword.

There was another, near the base of the same tree, standing as still as a lizard. These were professionals. I considered taking them out, but if there were more, and there may well be, that could alert them. I had to get back to Lissa and warn her first.

So I slipped away, and ran as fast as I could back to the wagon. Lissa saw me coming, and I could tell she knew we were in trouble. Without me even saying anything she began an incantation. I recognised it as a shield spell. Good, that would protect her and the wagon.

Using hand signals, I informed her that there were at least two ahead, and to be ready. She just nodded, and started another spell. I didn't wait around to hear what it was, but headed back towards the ambushers, arriving just about the same time as they saw the wagon.

They didn't move as it passed by. Obviously these two were going to hit it from the rear, which meant there were others waiting further up.

Time to act. Whilst their attention was on their target, I closed in and threw a knife at the one in the branches. I wanted to go for the man on the ground first, but he moved behind the tree.

The knife hit true, and the ambusher slid off his perch without making a sound. Unfortunately, his body crashing to the ground wasn't as quiet, and of course that alerted his friend, who turned around, sword in hand, to meet my attack.

I was impressed. He held out for a good ten seconds before I managed to penetrate his defences, and his neck. The man was above average for sure. Without wanting to sound boastful, not many could stand against me for that long.

Leaving him thrashing about on the floor, his life blood spurting from the deep wound, I ran on. Now I could hear screams and shouts from ahead. It seemed Lissa had encountered the enemy. More accurately, they had encountered her.

I burst out of the woods, to find three bodies lying on the road, or at least, the blackened remains of them. My wife, it seemed, had used one of her most powerful spells, essentially it was death spell, and in theory at least, was banned from use. Lissa had a dark side that very few people knew about. Mainly because the people who *had* seen it were dead.

Two more men were behind the wagon, both garbed in leather armour, and both trying to climb into the rear. They were having difficulty doing so, presumably because of Lissa's defensive wards.

"He's not in here," one was saying. Then he saw me, and screamed a warning. It was the last thing he did, as I ran him through.

The other man leaped backwards, impressively quickly, and brough his sabre to bear, leaving the wagon to rumble on.

Snarling, I attacked, and was efficiently blocked. If I had been younger and less experienced, meeting such an opponent in such a situation might have actually caused me to pause, which, in turn, would have left an opening. In this case, I was ready for his counter attack, and fended it off easily enough.

"You're as good as they say," my opponent said, smiling. He was a tall man, muscular, but not overly so, with long blond hair tied back, and intelligent blue eyes. If I had been interested in men, I'm sure I would have found him attractive.

"I'm glad I meet your expectations. Have we met?" Even as I asked the question, I moved in for another attack, which he dodged, and this led to brief flurry of swordplay, with him matching me stroke for stroke. His free hand moved, and, out of pure instinct, backed up by years of training, I dodged to one side, which meant the dagger he threw only impaled my upper arm, which hurt, but wouldn't prove fatal.

"Nice dodge," he said, skipping back to avoid my thrust. Pushing him back gave me time to pull out my long dagger with my other hand. This was a serious fight I had on my hands.

"No, I think not," he said, grinning, showing pearly white teeth. "*Retreat!*" he called over his shoulder.

"You are leaving me?" I asked, guard still up.

"Next time Rath Helmage," he replied, putting his sword up in a brief salute. With that he backed away, turned and ran.

I considered giving chase, but he wasn't alone, and I needed to check on Lissa.

Rushing round to the front of the wagon, I ducked as she faced me, hand wrapped in an unhealthy looking mist, ready to cast a spell.

"Don't shoot!" I said.

She smiled, and dropped her arm. The power dissipated. Then her eyes widened. "You're hurt!"

"It's nothing," I said.

She cast a quick dispel on the protective wards, and leaped down, examining the knife that was still embedded in my shoulder. "Not too bad, and no poison. Hold on."

I nodded, and she pulled the blade out, making me wince. After letting the blood flow for a second or two, she put her palm over the injury, and spoke a healing prayer.

"Thanks love," I said, once the injury was closed up. "Don't know what I would do without you."

"You'd have a lot more scars, that's for sure. Anywhere else?"

"No, fine."

"They were not your usual bandits," she said, as we walked around the wagon, and I examined the bodies that were not charcoal.

I shook my head. "No, look. Plain weapons yes, but good quality. Same with the armour." I checked their pouches, but other than a few coins, there was nothing to identify them. "Certainly professionals."

"Why would they attack us? Some enemy of ours from the past?"

"I heard one of them say 'He's not in here,' as I was coming up on them."

"He?" Lissa's eyes widened. "Do you think they were after Theo?"

I shrugged. "But why? I know he's strong, but he's just a small lad." I rubbed at my shoulder, even though the injury was now gone.

"What if someone doesn't want him to get more powerful?" Lissa looked worried. "Perhaps we should turn back."

"No, if they wanted to attack him at home, they wouldn't have waited until we were here. Your wards around the house, and Hungerford, not to mention Freia, and Theo himself, make that a much harder target."

"Perhaps." Lissa sighed.

"Come on, let's get moving, find a place to stop."

"Very well." Lissa looked at the bodies. "We'll take their armour and weapons though. At least let's make some money of them."

"There's my adventurer wife," I said, smiling.

She gave me a kiss and then climbed back onto the wagon. "Let's not tell Theo, I don't want to worry him. I'll write a separate letter to Hungerford and warn him."

I nodded. "I agree. Now, give me a minute or two, and we'll be off again."

"Indeed."

I spent a few minutes stripping the bodies of anything valuable and loading them onto the wagon, after which, Lissa gee'd up the oxen once more, and we rolled on, leaving the dead behind.

Demon Lord.

"What do you mean, he wasn't there?" I snarled at the shadowy Person X.

X just shrugged, unconcerned by my anger. Considering he was half a continent away, that was understandable. "I mean, he wasn't in the wagon. The women were, and as expected, they were formidable. I lost men."

"I don't care about your men, where was he?"

"Either they sent him ahead, which doesn't really make sense, or they left him behind. Do you want us to go and see?"

I slumped back in my chair. My hand went to my injury, and I scratched at it. Lately the pain had been slightly less, but now it itched all the time. "No, never mind. If he's there, he will be well guarded, they wouldn't leave him unprotected. It seems fate is working against me. I shall try other means. Your services are no longer needed for this."

"I expect to be paid the agreed sum, even so."

Humans and their greed. It was annoying. It was also useful. "You shall have your money."

"And if..." I cut the connection, uninterested in any further talk.

It was time for plan B.

Progress.

My mothers were as good as their word, of course, and I received a number of letters, probably averaging one a month, although some were duplicates. I think they sent several copies of each to increase the odds of one getting through. They also wrote to Hungerford, but he didn't enlighten me as to the contents of his, and I didn't dare ask.

Both he and I wrote back of course. Hungerford instructed me in how to send a letter, escorting me into the village, and to the shop, an old fashioned – from my perspective at least – version of the US Postal Express, with riders carrying bags of mail on horseback for urgent deliveries. Other post and parcels went by carriage that also took passengers.

Their letters contained a lot of reassurance that they were okay, and a lot of thinking about me. Mother stuff, which, whilst not very exciting, warmed my heart. I, in return, gave reports on my progress with Hungerford, and how the farm was doing. Certainly nothing about Gisela.

I was actually living alone in the house with Freia most of the time, as Hungerford stayed in his hut. Now, you can't live with someone without bumping into them, even at night, and I had to say that Freia walked around in quite the revealing night dress. It wasn't low cut or anything, but it was simple, fairly thin, had a rather low top, and was quite short, which allowed me a fantastic view of her very shapely legs.

It caused me to pause on occasion, as she flounced around in such an outfit. Freia, thanks to her lifestyle and training, was superbly fit. She didn't have big titties, but they were nice all the same, and I'd always been a fan of the pert body. Maybe it was because I was so young she didn't care, but I was treated to a delightful view sometimes as she leaned over. Oh dear! If only I was older!

I even managed to contrive to walk past the bathing area a couple of times, as she was using it. I'd done this before on occasion, but not so much as my mothers were around then too. Freia didn't seem to care that the door was ajar, which was nice for me. The steam obscured most of the view, but the images I caught I resolved to remember clearly, until my body was old enough to do something about them! If only I had a camera. Maybe for the best I didn't.

I tittered evilly, and then scampered off as she called out.

Apart from those distractions, the season went by uneventfully, and the next thing I knew, it was winter. My meetings with Gisel were cut off as the snow came in with a vengeance. Even my training was paused for a while as the world outside was buried in white.

"It's not usually this bad," Freia said, as we sat around the table eating dinner. Sadly the cold meant that she was bundling up more. Today she was clad in a long, furry robe that went from her neck to her feet. "In fact, I can't remember snow and cold like this." As if to emphasise her point, she stood up and added another log to the fireplace.

"It is not the worst I have encountered here," Hungerford said.

My sword master had moved into the house when the cold weather hit, as his hut was simply not warm enough.

"However, I haven't seen anything quite like this for some years. It is of concern."

"Why is that master?" I asked, spooning some chicken broth into my mouth.

"Because the last time this happened, it was demonic influence. They were trying to weaken us before a spring offensive. Of course, that was a time of war and chaos."

"You were in a war?" I asked. Hungerford was not usually forthcoming about his past.

He nodded, slowly, in way of reply. "I am not at all old enough to have been in the last major demon war," he said. "However, there are occasional smaller conflicts between the human and non-human. The last of any significance was, perhaps, thirty years ago, before your mothers were born even." He gave me a smile.

"Oh?" I tried to put on a surprised face, like this was so long ago I couldn't imagine. In fact, thirty years ago I had... My first life. I guess. It seemed like five minutes to me sometimes.

There was an Orc lord, he united the clans, which happens every so often, and gathered a large army to invade. To weaken us, his shamans employed some dark magic that gave us a terrible, and long, winter. Our spies though, had warned us of this, and we were prepared. When they did attack, expecting us to be terribly weakened, we were ready for them. It was still a hard battle, but, in the end, we won decisively."

"I wish I could have fought beside you!" Freia said, showing her fiery nature.

Hungerford gave her a sad smile. "I hope you never have to fight in something like that lass," he said, which put our maid back down in her seat. "I still have scars from that time." He tapped his head, and then his heart, indicating he wasn't speaking of physical injuries.

PTSD, I thought.

"But the fight! The glory of battle!" Freia wasn't so easily discouraged.

"That glory is written by bards," Hungerford responded. "Who haven't waded through the blood and gore. Who haven't seen their friends, even their loved ones, brutally cut down. War is not glory lass."

"Oh." Freia sagged further. I think Hungerford saw this.

"That said, don't let this discourage you. Your blade work, with more practice, will be even more

advanced than mine, so I think. And an honourable battle won is something to be proud of. The butchery of war... that has no glory.”

“I understand master,” she replied.

From my perspective, from one who had seen the less savoury side of life and death, I understood what Hungerford was talking about. And yet, to try and explain that to a young, eager, teenager, was not easy. She would find out in time, as millions had done before her.

~*~

“Better! Finally.”

“Ouch,” was my response.

The winter was behind us, the snow suddenly having given way to warm weather, and I was back to my routine.

It had been nearly six months since Hungerford had started teaching me the Saint technique. Not that you would have guessed I was learning to wield a sword, because, apart from some new set sequences I’d had to learn, I’d spent most of my time without my wooden weapon in hand.

Instead, Hungerford had me using my wind blasting incantations to put my body through all sorts of acrobatics. He had devised assault courses for me, devious, frankly downright dangerous, courses, which involved me diving, jumping, twisting over, under on, through things. I had to balance on moving beams, run along planks that squirmed underfoot, all whilst blowing metal balls, set to swinging on the end of ropes, out of the way with my magic.

I had learned a *lot* though. The incantation I’d planned to use to fly I now used to jump massive distances. I used it to throw myself out of the way of objects and attacks, to make wild, frankly impossible looking manoeuvres, and to blow attacks off course, or even stop and reverse them.

Most of the time I had one, or both, hands tied behind my back. Literally.

“The issue with Saint method, is that the fighter generally has to have one hand free to cast their magic. Unless you can manage without that?” Hungerford had asked me, at the start of my training.

“I can, but it helps to use my hand to guide my magic.”

“If you don’t *need* to use your hand, we will work on that. Having the second hand free for a shield, or another weapon, would be a huge positive.”

And so that was the case. In the following months I had become quite the acrobat. A magically assisted ninja type! Of course, my body was still young and supple, which helped, but the extra strength and speed that Midex had gifted me also made a big difference.

By the time my fifth birthday rolled around, I was like a tumbling acrobat on steroids played on fast forward.

The intense training meant I couldn’t meet up with Gisel quite so much, but both our language skills were now good enough that we could afford to slacken off a little. Our meetings now were more active than before.

Thanks to Hungerford’s training, I had finally acquired the ability to fly, using my magic jets. It had involved a few spills, but I was now able to zip around quite well, and at a fair speed. I had restricted my height though, because it was actually still fairly easy to lose control and tumble to the ground. Maybe if I had some kind of parachute I would try higher. Something to ponder. Perhaps a floating spell, some kind of anti-gravity thing? I didn’t have any idea how to even start with that one.

Gisel's magic improvement had slowed up quite a lot. Frankly, I think she had pretty much reached the limit of what she was capable of. Even so, she was pleased with her progress, and was always working on new ways to make more of what she had. I like to think I inspired her with my out of the box thinking.

In return, she had been teaching me how to use knives which, I had found out, were her weapon of choice. Throwing knives especially.

That time I had seen her with the small, curved, blade, she had actually used all her throwing blades on the bugbear. I'd not seen them on its body, but I hadn't been looking, or maybe it had pulled them out.

In any case, she usually had a brace of the things strapped around her. In our previous meetings she had just carried a few concealed ones, but now she had decided to teach me, she came with a strap looped over her shoulder just filled with them.

They were slim, small blades with no real hilt. More like slivers of dark black, and very, *very* sharp metal. It took practice just to hold them properly without cutting my fingers half off.

"No no, I've told you, like this dummy!" Gisel adjusted the knives I was holding, so I had one ready to throw, and another palmed in my hand to replace it. It really was quite hard. "Yes, better. Now, throw the first one, then slide the second into position."

"I threw the first one, which missed the target (a small tree that had somehow survived my magical practices) and dropped the second blade.

Gisel rolled her eyes.

"Sorry." I picked up the knife, and promptly cut my finger on it.

She sighed, and took it from me as I sucked at my wound. "It's a good job I didn't bring the poisoned ones."

"Eh?" I took the finger out of my mouth rather quickly.

She giggled. Something she didn't often do. Gisel was a serious girl, although, in this harsh world, children seemed to be far less child-like than my old one. They had to grow up a lot faster I guess, due to the brutal reality of survival.

"Do you think these little things would stop someone?"

I looked at her daggers. "Maybe?"

"Perhaps against a smaller human or animal, or maybe with an eye shot, but against any kind of serious warrior or larger creature, they would be pin pricks. Hence they are usually coated with a substance that dries on the blade. It's safe to handle, you can even lick it, but if it enters the blood." She made a face.

Despite the gruesome expression, I smiled. Whilst her body, and my own, were still too young to pique my interest in any sexual way, Gisel was a very pretty girl.

This had surprised me at first. The goblin guards I had met, and the one that usually escorted her here, were the height of, maybe, a short man, squat and wide, with a face only a mother could love. Gisel herself, whilst slightly older than me, was only just a little taller. Yet, apart from the colour of her skin, and her ears and fangs, she looked like a human.

I had managed a visit or two to her village by this time, and had noticed that, whilst some goblins were more like the ones imagined back in my old world, many had an appearance far less extreme than I expected. Yes, they were green skinned, had the ears and fangs (and some had claw-like nails too), but apart from being generally a little shorter, many of them had quite human-like features. I saw a few young women who were positively stunning.

And yet, others of the village were much more in line with what I would have expected from a goblin. Shorter, with beast-like features. Uglier, essentially.

I had brought this up with Gisel, in a polite way, and she had explained.

"It's because most of my tribe are what you would call surface goblins," she said. "Our entire species is actually an offshoot of what man-creatures call the demon race. The demons, as you call them, were in this world before humans, so the stories go, and were handsome beings. When humans came, they displaced many demons from their lands. Some of them went underground, and lived there for thousands of years. In that time they changed, and an offshoot became what you call goblins. Some goblins though, didn't spend so much time underground, and those are what we call surface goblins. The underground ones are not so pretty, I admit." She sniffed, and threw her hair about like a shampoo commercial. "I am one of the pretty ones."

"You are," I said, eyeing the knife she was still holding. Females are females throughout the multiverse, it seems.

Sadly, my time in the village had been limited, partly because of a political problem caused, in a roundabout way, by me.

Gisel's father had promised her future hand in marriage to the son of another chief, but my intervention had clouded the issue, with the life debt and all. She *did* have a younger sister, but the prospective groom, or at least his parents, viewed her as unsuitable, for whatever reason. Hence my appearance in the village reminded the chief of the problems I had caused him. Even though I had saved his daughter, he generally was no longer so pleased to see me.

The issue may not have been such a big deal, but there was something going on with the goblins, and maybe the monster – perhaps I should say non-human – population to the north as a whole. Some fighting in another land was going on, which was pushing the denizens out of territories, which, in turn, pushed others out of theirs, and so on. As a result of this movement, there had been skirmishes over land, and previously promised alliances were being formed and strengthened, one of which had been Gisel's marriage.

Still, I figured there wasn't really anything I could do about it. The whole life debt issue had been brought up by the goblins, not me, and apparently if they went back on the deal would cause lost face and shame to the chief, so he was between a rock and a hard place.

All of this had only increased Gisel's desire to go with me into the human lands.

"But it would be dangerous," I said, for the thousandth time.

"Do I look like a coward to you?" she snarled, folding her arms, which were rather more muscled than my own.

"Of course not!" I held my hands out, not wishing to be punched. I had found that goblins had a fairly short fuse, and Gisel wasn't above resorting to violence. I could defend myself of course, but somehow this didn't seem right. Maybe I am too chivalrous, although, not sure where that came from.

"You are always saying how smart you are, you can figure something out."

"I don't recall saying that." I scratched my head.

"Well, I know you are smart. Same thing."

"Let me think on it. We have some time still," I said.

"Good, now, come on, pick up this knife and try again."

"I'm still bleeding!"

The next few months passed in much the same way, although the warmer weather and green leaves sprouting from the trees made things a lot more pleasant.

Hungerford finally allowed me to pick up my wooden sword for something more than just set sequence practice, which was good in one way, but less fun in another, as he would mercilessly exploit my mistakes, of which I made many, and I would end up getting repeatedly wacked and jabbed with the wooden stick he used to spar with me.

"He's a Master Bladesman," I kept telling myself. "I'm lucky to get this level of training."

Tell my poor, battered, body that.

My meetings with Gisel carried on as well. We had taken to exploring the surrounding areas, going for walks along the forest, and sometimes even within a little bit. She taught me about various plants that grew there, and what they could be used for.

"Oh, look," she said, one day, as we were strolling along. "It's a Pearl plant." She squatted down next to a small shrub, sitting in the roots of a tree. "When it blooms, the flowers have a small round appearance. You can pick and dry them, and use them as a general purpose antidote to poison. We must remember where this is and come back for it when it blooms."

"Pearl plant," I muttered, writing in the small notebook I had taken to carrying around with me for just such events.

"What language is that?" Gisel asked, peering over my shoulder. "It doesn't look like man-creature writing, or even my language."

"It's from where I grew up," I said, without even thinking about what I was saying.

"What do you mean, *grew up*? You're five!"

"Oh, er, I mean, it's a special code I made."

"Make your mind up." Gisel gave me a look.

Maybe I shouldn't take notes in English, practicing this world's language wouldn't be a bad idea, but it was just easier, and also more private.

"Sorry, it's just easier for me."

"It doesn't look like it's easier to write. What are all these squiggles? That's nothing like the language I've seen in the books my teacher has shown me."

She meant the runic writing of this world's human language I guessed. It did look very different.

"Are you learning to read too?" I asked her, desperate to change the subject."

"I am," she said, proudly.

"I never thought about helping you to do that. Maybe we can go over some lessons. What about your tongue? I can't read any of that. Well, I've never seen any writing in it."

"I shall teach you too!" she declared.

After that, we both worked on reading and writing, although progress was slower, as materials were a little harder to come by. Gisel said there were only two books in the village in her language, and she herself wasn't very skilled at writing. Even so, it was all useful.

One time, as I was returned home from one of these mutual lessons with Gisel, Hungerford approached me.

"Lad," he said. "Where have you been?"

"Just walking about," I replied, keeping it vague.

"Well, I don't want you straying too far just now. There have been a number of monster attacks just north of the village in the last few days. Two men out hunting game were attacked, one was killed, and the other is missing."

"Monsters?"

"Aye. We're not sure what kind. Maybe orc, could be goblins. Just don't wander off into the wilds."

"Yes master," I replied, absent mindedly. *It couldn't be goblins!* Could it? No, Gisel's tribe had been in the forest for well over a year, and they hadn't attacked before. Why would they now? It must be some of these other creatures that had been displaced from the troubles to the north.

It was too late to return to speak to Gisel that day, so I had to endure the evening, night, and all through training the next morning before dashing up to meet her. I even used my magic to fly there, I was in such a nervous rush.

Which meant I arrived before her of course, and had to wait for half an hour before she turned up.

"Oh, you're early today," she said, when she finally appeared.

"Gisel, do you know anything about these attacks on the village?" I asked, not beating about the bush.

"Yes, I am well, thank you for asking." She scowled at me.

"I'm sorry. Good morning Gisel, you are looking lovely today." A bit of flattery never hurt, even when the girl was a goblin, and only about six years old.

"Thank you." She beamed, and sat down on the fallen tree we always used. The wood was beginning to get smooth from the wear of our behinds, small as they both were. "Yes, I heard yesterday. There were some kobolds that wandered into our territory. One of our patrols found them feasting on a man. They were killed. My father doesn't want any trouble with the village."

"I thought it must be something like that," I said. "Hopefully it will be a one off."

"Yes." She didn't look too concerned, so I relaxed. "Now then, I want to teach you how to write some plant names..."

With the death of the kobolds, the attacks in the village stopped, and life slowly returned to normal, much to my relief, and it wasn't long before I had a letter telling me that my mothers would be returning soon!

That set Freia and Hungerford into a cleaning frenzy. My lessons were cancelled as we scoured the house from top to bottom, preparing for their return. It was a good job I was fitter now, from all the training, otherwise I think I would have collapsed under the constant barrage of tasks Freia assigned to me. I swear I polished every single bit of wooden floor in the house twice over.

Eventually though, it was done, and not a day too soon as, one late afternoon, a wagon, perhaps not the same one as before, appeared on the road, with a familiar figure sitting at the reins.

"Mother!" I cried, waving like mad and running towards them. I had been waiting in the garden.

"Theo!" Rath waved back, and Lissa's head popped out from the back, joining in the waving.

I sped up to the wagon, and, using a quick blast of wind-jet magic, literally flew up into Rath's arms.

"Oh my word! How did you do that?" Rath asked, clutching at me in surprise, and hugging me close.

I buried my head in her generous bosom and hugged her back as both Lissa and Rath peppered me with kisses.

"We missed you so much!" Lissa said.

"Look how much you've grown!" Rath held me up in front of her, making me giggle. For that moment I actually felt the age my body was. It was a nice feeling.

"Hungerford has been training me!" I said, as Lissa took me and sat me on her lap, and Rath gee'd up the oxen that had come to a halt.

"I look forward to seeing what you can do sweetie." Lissa stroked my head. I leaned back and took in the scent of my mothers. I really hadn't realised quite how much I had missed them.

Hungerford and Freia had both been working in the kitchen for hours, preparing a meal for us all. I had been shoed out, after Freia nearly tripped over me for the tenth time, which was why I was waiting in the garden.

"Thank you for your letters," Lissa said, as we pulled up in front of the house. Freia appeared, and waved. "They were very welcome. Your writing is much neater than my own!" She laughed.

"Welcome Blessed, my lady," Freia said, bowing as the wagon came to a halt.

"Hello Freia, you're looking well. I hope our boy here hasn't been too much trouble."

"He's fine," she replied. I was slightly relieved she didn't mention me spying on her in the bath. Looks like I'd got away with that.

"Glad to hear it. Hello Hungerford."

I jumped down off the wagon, and Lissa and Rath both followed, climbing down in a more sedate fashion.

"Blessed, lass," Hungerford replied. He always used a more respectful tone with Lissa than with Rath, but I guess Rath had been his student, whereas Lissa was a representative of the goddess.

We headed inside, where my mothers went to their room to wash and change. I helped put the plates out, and do the last minute things needed before we sat down to eat.

It wasn't long before we were all around the table, eating the delicious meal that Hungerford and Freia had prepared. I sat between my mothers, getting the occasional pat on the head, and just ate slowly as the adults, at least the physical adults – and Freia – caught up with the news, including Hungerford's report on my progress.

"You are definitely going to join magic class when we get back to the academy," Lissa said, looking down at me, after Hungerford finished his summary.

"Yes mother," I replied. I was actually looking forward to being able to learn some new skills. I had exhausted everything useful in the material I had smuggled back.

"With that in mind, we brought you a few new books for you to read," Rath said.

"You did?" I grinned in delight, trying to stand up.

"*After dinner!*"

"Yes mother."

"One more thing," Hungerford said. "There was some monster activity a little while ago. They stopped after two men were attacked, one killed, one missing, but recently there have been other sightings, and a few henhouses broken into, not by foxes either.

Lissa and Rath exchanged a glance.

Interesting. I thought. *What was that?*

"Now you're here, I suggest you call a village meeting about putting some measures in place,"

Hungerford went on.

"I need to visit the temple anyway," Lissa sighed. "We can head there in the morning, and Rath can talk to the mayor."

"You know the mayor?" I asked Rath, eyes wide.

She smiled at me. "I do little one," she said.

"Your mothers are important people in this town," Freia said, wagging a spoon.

"Come now Freia, we're just common citizens," Lissa said.

Freia didn't reply, but made a face that suggested she thought otherwise. I had to agree with Freia on this one. A skilled Weapon Master and a highly respected Sister of the Blessed were not ordinary titles, especially in a small village like this one.

The meal went on with less significant talk after that, and finally ended with Lissa taking me up to bed, and tucking me in like a child.

Well, I guess I still was.

May as well enjoy it whilst I can, I thought, just before I fell asleep.

Confrontation.

Rath and Lissa were impressed, and slightly shocked I think, when I put on a display of what I had learned, jumping through one of Hungerford's tortuous assault courses.

"I'm glad I wasn't here when you were learning this," Lissa said, hugging me afterwards. "I'm not sure I would have allowed such rough training. Are you hurt sweetie? Do you need healing?"

"I'm fine mother," I replied.

"He's a tough lad, I wouldn't have damaged him too much," Hungerford said.

"It's good work," Rath agreed, nodding. "I assume you've not really done much in the way of actual swordplay yet?"

"Just the very basics."

"He can join the classes at the academy then, when he's old enough." Rath patted my head. "We may make you into a warrior yet little one."

I beamed at the praise, although I was more interested in becoming a mage than a fighter. Still, having both skills would be useful.

We soon fell back into our routine, with Rath joining in my training here and there. I was happy when she praised my skills, although, as my mother, I suppose she would do that.

As happy as I was with my improvements, when I watched her and Freia in a full on sparring match, using very real, very sharp swords, I suddenly felt a hopeless beginner again. The strikes both made were so fast you could barely see them. Plus they moved as quickly as I did, but without any magic to help them.

"Don't look so down lad," Hungerford said, startling me by resting a hand gently on my head. I hadn't even realised he was standing next to me. "You don't realise how fast you look when you're tumbling like you do. Plus, both of them have been practicing for longer than you've been alive. You will soon be just as impressive."

"Thank you master," I said. His words did cheer me up a little, leaving me to appreciate the skill of

both my mother and the younger girl.

As good as Freia was for her age, she wasn't good enough to beat Rath. I had seen Rath get hit a couple of times, but nothing serious at all, and I could tell Freia sometimes walked away from these matches boiling with frustration.

I could sympathise.

One morning I walked into breakfast to find Lissa putting a lid on a bowl.

"Good morning," she said, giving me a kiss on the top of my head. "Hungerford, your mother, and I are going to a gathering in the village today, so Freia will look after your training. This is something to eat for later." She patted the covered bowl.

"Can't I come too?" I asked.

"No sweetie, this is for adults. Now, go and do your training. And..."

"And?"

"And after your training, you are to stay in the house until we return please."

"What? When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure, but don't worry, it will be fine." She patted me on the head again, and then shoed me out of the back door.

Now, I don't know about you, but when someone tells me not to worry, unprompted, I tend to worry.

"Come on, you're late!" Freia swung her sword. She seemed in a bad mood. "Fifteen laps warmup first, go!" she said, before I could even say anything.

Sighing, I didn't want to be smacked, I started running around the track we had established, which was down the side of the orchard until about half way, then through the trees, back and round again. When I had first come here, I would have collapsed after a single lap. Now I finished fifteen with barely a sweat.

"A hundred pushups."

"Squats."

"Jumps."

"Now your sequences," she said, throwing me my small wooden sword.

"Which ones?" I asked, catching it deftly.

"All of them."

"All of them?"

"Come on." Freia swung her own practice sword, a larger version of mine, and smacked me on the rump with the flat of it. "Move it shrimp!"

Maybe she had seen me spying on her in the bath after all, I thought, as I started my routines. Although why wait until now to take it out on me?

My practice felt like back when I had started, with Freia prodding and jabbing at me every thirty seconds to correct a so called mistake, although I was fairly sure I was doing the moves right.

Still, another full hour later, sweating and sore, I managed to finish the last sequence.

"Very good. Now, let's have a practice," my moody teenage instructor said. She took on the basic Spy style stance.

"What, you mean to spar with me?"

"Yes, you can use all your magic skills. Let's see how good you have become."

I made a face, but took a deep breath and assumed a Saint style posture that I thought was a good response to hers. She nodded slightly.

"When you're ready."

I didn't think that would be for a good ten years, but even so, I had to try.

My first move was an all-out attack. I blasted myself forward with my jet magic, sword held out in front of me, and basically became an arrow.

I like to think it surprised her, but even if it did, she was far too skilled to go down that way, and easily dodged to one side, which I had expected. However, at the same time she somehow avoided the blast of wind I sent at her in an attempt to make her overbalance, and so when I did my follow up attack, which involved knocking myself at a ninety degree angle after her, she was ready, and I suffered a sharp hit to my side, which sent me tumbling off onto the ground.

"Ow," I moaned, lying there, stunned.

"Theo! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hit you so hard!" She ran over to me and knelt down, her face etched with concern.

She really was very pretty, I thought.

"Are you all right? Did you break anything?"

"I will live," I said, struggling to sit up. "What's with you today Freia?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you angry with me for some reason?"

She was going to deny it, I saw, but then something gave, and she slumped back. "I'm sorry Theo," she said, in a weary tone. "It's just, well, everyone is out monster hunting, and I was told to stay back and look after you. I'm missing the action."

"What? Monster hunting?"

"Yes, there have been goblins sighted in the woods to the north. People think they are behind the recent raids, maybe the two men, so your mothers, along with a few nuns from the temple and some of the local guards, are off this morning attacking their base, somewhere in the forest."

"What?" I shouted, scrambling to my feet. "They're attacking the village?"

"Yes, we can't..."

"The goblins didn't do anything! It was the kobolds!"

"What are you talking about?"

I was suddenly frantic. *The village!* With Rath and Hungerford leading an attack, and with my mother and the temple backing them up, along with the guards, the goblins were in serious danger. *Gisel* was in serious danger!

"I have to get there before it's too late!" I cried.

"What? No! You need to... Theo! Get back here! What the fu..."

Freia's voice faded behind me. I had launched myself into the air, flying much higher than I had ever dared before, over the trees of the orchard, over the wall beyond, and towards the forest.

I slowed down a little as I took my bearings, it looked different from above, but soon found our

glade.

I had only been to the village about three or four times in total, and that was on the ground, but I knew the rough direction to head, and so I did, whizzing over the treetops, fear and anxiety driving me onwards.

It was beginning to think I had lost my way, when an explosion ahead, and slightly to the right of me, gave the game away. I adjusted course and flew a little higher, scanning the ground.

As I approached the area of the disturbance, there was a shimmer, and suddenly the goblin village clearing came into view. Someone had dispelled the camouflaging spell that had hidden it. Probably Lissa. Oh, the irony of it.

There was shouting as well now, and I could hear the echo of metal on metal. Was I too late?

There! Between the trees I could see a group of villagers, Rath stood out in her green armour, and Lissa was clearly visible further back, dressed in her white robes, standing with a few others from the temple. There were others in chain mail and leather armour too, holding swords and bows. I couldn't see Hungerford, but no doubt he was there somewhere.

Facing them were a crowd of goblin guards, with their own weapons. To the side I saw the chief, raging and shouting and... yes! By *his* side stood Gisel, hand on a knife. I was sure it would be one of the poisoned ones.

There was still time, full battle hadn't been joined yet, although one goblin seemed to be nursing an injury.



Swooping down, I cast a dozen small fireballs in front of me, which exploded in a line between the two forces, startling them both, and causing them to step back, which had been the intended effect.

I dropped down to the smouldering ground in the middle of the factions like a very tiny angel of death.

"Stop!" I screamed. *"Stop the fighting!"*

"Theo! By the goddess what are you thinking?!" That was Rath. She started run towards me, but I sent a strong, and wide, blast of wind her way, and knocked her back.

"Sorry mother!" I shouted. *"But you need to stop. The goblins weren't the ones who attacked the village!"*

"Theo!" I turned to see Gisel running up towards me.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"What is happening? Did you know about this?" Gisel was holding a dagger in front of her.

"No! I only just found out! Please, put your dagger down, let me talk to my mothers!"

"These are your mothers?" Gisel's father thundered up behind her.

"Theo!" screamed Rath. *"Since when can you speak their language? Get away!"* She struggled forward again, but I held up my hand, and she paused, possibly expecting another spell.

"Theodore Helmage!" Now Lissa was beside her. *"Stop this at once!"*

"Please listen to me!" I cried back. My voice was going sore, I would have to figure out some kind of amplification spell if I did this again. *"The goblins are not responsible for the attacks! They were even the ones who stopped them before!"*

"What are you saying?" Lissa asked, in a slightly calmer voice.

"Please," I pleaded. *"Please, can we just pause and hold a parley? You and mother, and the chief*

and his advisor." I saw Gisel's expression. "And Gisel."

"How do you know these creatures?" Rath asked.

"If we have a parley, I can explain. Please, stop the attack. Pause it at least. Is there a rush?"

Rath looked at Lissa, and then Hungerford, who had appeared from nowhere. I could hear them have a frantic discussion. Another sister from the temple, and a man in a metal chest plate joined in. Maybe he was the mayor, I had never met him.

Behind me, the goblin chief was having a louder discussion with his advisor and the terrifying goblin general. Gisel was just glaring at me.

After a few very tense minutes, Rath shouted over. "Very well, three of us will approach your position. We will remain armed, but with weapons sheathed."

"Agreed. Same," Gisel's father shouted back.

And so I stood there as the two sides approached. Rath, Lissa, and the mayor from one side, and the chief, his advisor and the general from the other.

"What is the meaning of this attack?" the chief said, once the parties were close enough to talk without shouting.

"Your people attacked our village!" the mayor said.

"*We did not!*"

"You expect us to believe your lies?" the mayor responded, hand on sword hilt.

"They've been here for more than a year!" I interjected. "It wasn't them! They just want to live in peace."

"How do you know?" Rath snapped at me. I had never seen my mother so angry.

I sighed and looked at the ground.

"I've been coming here for all that time now. To meet Gisel." I pointed at the chief's daughter.

"We've been teaching each other languages."

"You are going to be sent to your room for the rest of your life after this," Lissa said.

"The point is, it wasn't the goblins. They have been here all this time."

"Is this true?" Rath asked, looking at the chief.

"True."

"Then who killed those men?" the mayor snapped. "And who's been raiding the hen houses?"

"Men killed by kobolds," the chief answered. "Not sure about the hens. Many new creatures coming from the north recently."

"I don't believe you." The mayor didn't seem very open to negotiation, and I worried he may escalate things.

"Wait." Rath put a hand out. "What the go... chief says matches what we have been hearing from various sources. There's been a general exodus from the north recently."

This was interesting. So my mothers knew about this?

The air calmed slightly. The goblin chief said something in low tones to his advisor, who nodded, and spoke.

"Please, let us invite you to our village, for further talks."

"What? Are you mad?" the mayor spluttered. "Go into your stronghold?"

Rath though, looked at me thoughtfully, and then back at the chief. "Very well," she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe I would live to see tomorrow.

~*~

Rath, Lissa and the mayor finally agreed to accompany the chief's party to his tent. I have to say, that walk was probably the most tense five minutes I had ever experienced. I could *palpably* feel the anger coming at me from both my mothers. I was going to be in for a hard time after this, no matter the outcome. Perhaps I would get lucky, and we'd all be slaughtered in an ambush.

The group eventually ended up sitting cross-legged in the chief's tent, on the large mat on the ground. I stood behind my mothers. Gisel stood behind her father.

The chief offered a pipe, which was passed around for everyone to take a puff on. Rath did, Lissa and the mayor refused. I was reminded of an old western movie.

Eventually the talks got underway in earnest, and frankly, I was surprised at how well they went. Not only was the whole attack situation talked out, but it seemed that the human and goblin population had more to offer each other than anyone expected. The forest held many herbs, foodstuffs and plants that were valued by the villagers, whilst the village could provide certain manufactured goods and foods from El and beyond. Both sides had something in the way of weaponry to trade too, and both sides would benefit from keeping hostile intruders at bay.

It turned out this could be the start of something more.

Still there was a trust issue, mostly driven by the mayor, but I knew he wouldn't be the only one.

"How do we know you won't renege on these agreements?" he demanded.

"We are no base animals!" the chief snarled. "Can trust!"

This went back and forth for several minutes, until I suddenly had a flash of inspiration. It could solve several issues at the same time. Two birds with one stone and all that. I had to phrase it carefully though.

"Excuse me," I said. "Hello?"

No one was listening.

"HELLO!" I shouted. That caught their attention.

"What is it Theodore?" Rath snapped. Oh, I really *was* in trouble if she was using my full name.

"I have an idea," I said.

"Go on." At least they were still listening.

"How about we take a..." I didn't want to say hostage. Oh! "How about we take Gisel, the chief's daughter back with us, as a... goodwill ambassador?"

Everyone looked at Gisel, who stared at me, eyes wide.

"What?" Lissa asked.

"She could come with us, back to the academy. Surely contact between humans and goblins could benefit from some familiarity? Look at the things we've talked about today."

"But she's only three," the mayor pointed out.

"I'm over six actually," Gisel said, snarling.

"Still, very young."

"But that could be a good thing," I went on. "She can join classes at the academy, she's a good

fighter, and learn the way of the humans, to bring back understanding to the tribe.” I was sweating, this was pushing my luck.

Still the suggestion seemed to be taking root. They talked it over, and finally, amazingly, agreed, although Lissa pointed out they couldn’t guarantee the academy would accept her.

“Still, I’m sure two very well respected teachers could convince them,” I said. This drew fierce glares from both my mothers. I mentally shrugged. I had dug a hole so deep by now another few shovels worth weren’t going to make any difference.

And with that, it seemed the final major hurdle was cleared.

In a spirit totally opposite to the one that it had started with, the two groups parted, with promises of more talks to come very soon. Gisel would be allowed to stay until a final agreement was struck. She gave me an odd look, and a small wave as I was ushered out of the tent. I managed a quick smile in return.

The journey back, once the attacking force had been briefed, was accompanied by stone cold silence towards me from my Rath and Lissa, and my legs began to shake a little.

My mothers, Hungerford and I parted from the main group at the road, and turned towards the house, still in total silence.

Freia met us at the gate, shouting and weeping in relief when she saw us all together. Rath and Lissa both reassured her we were all fine, and she wasn’t in any trouble. Hungerford simply patted her on the head, and then headed off towards his hut.

The four of us entered the house, and I stood there, visibly trembling. Freia, sensing the mood, vanished into her room.

I hadn’t been this scared in two lifetimes.

There was no shouting at that point though. Rath simply turned to me and said: “Go to bed.”

I fled, still shaking, went to the toilet, had a very quick wash, and buried myself in the blankets on my bunk, my head spinning.

Amazingly, I fell asleep almost immediately.

~*~

The shouting happened the next morning.

It went on for a long time, with Lissa and Rath taking turns. There was no bad cop, good cop here. It was bad cop, worse cop, horrific cops.

Mostly the issues were how I had disobeyed them, broken their trust, and put myself in danger. They were all valid points, I had to admit.

Guilty on all counts your honour.

Still, all good things come to an end, and they finally wound down.

“Do you have anything to say?” Rath asked, eventually.

“I’m sorry. Very sorry.”

Both my mothers took deep breaths, and looked at each other.

“We have discussed long and hard about your punishment for this,” Lissa said.

Here it comes.

“The problem is, you are an intelligent boy,” Rath added.

"Far too intelligent for your age," Lissa chimed in again.

"And apart from this *very* major breach of trust, you're a good lad." Rath once more.

"But even so, there needs to be a punishment." Lissa.

"So, firstly, we are confiscating all your books."

Nooo!

"And you will not be allowed out of the house unaccompanied."

Also not so good.

"You will not be allowed desserts at dinner."

No! I loved Lissa's cakes! This was a heavy blow.

"You will also help Freia with the chores in the afternoons, and this will carry on until we return to the academy. Do you understand?" Rath glared at me.

"I understand mothers," I said, as meekly as possible.

"I will add," Lissa added. "We are both very disappointed with you."

"Yes mothers."

"However, we are also very proud of you."

Eh?

"Without your intervention, there would have been many casualties, on both sides, and the problems would not have been resolved. They would even have become worse."

"Thank you," I said.

"Very well. You will report outside for training, as usual."

I fled. Being beaten by Hungerford's stick seemed like the preferable choice right now.

~*~

I was worked to the bone for the next nine or ten days, training in the morning and helping with the chores in the afternoon.

I accepted my fate with some stoicism. After all, I *had* disobeyed my parents, who were simply trying to do what was best for me. I had to remember that, to them, I was a young child. They didn't know about my past life, and how I saw things through the eyes of a mature adult. Okay, a mature adult looking through the eyes of a young child, if we're being pedantic.

Freia was angry with me at first. In private she scolded me for, literally, taking off on her, scaring her witless. In hindsight, I could see her point of view, and I apologised profusely, even grovelling on the floor and promising to kiss her feet (which wasn't something I was usually into, but hey,) until she eventually just laughed and told me to stand up and be a man.

After that she was friendlier, probably more friendly than she had ever been actually, and even sneaked me some of Lissa's cake every now and then. I was grateful for both her cheer and the food, and resolved to be nicer to her, maybe even stop trying to peer in at her when she was in the bath. Nah, some things are too good to miss.

The first break in my new routine was when Rath and Lissa, along with Hungerford and Freia, took me to the signing ceremony for the new treaty between our village and the goblin settlement. It seemed that negotiations had been intense, but had, overall, gone well.

There was now a mutual defence pact between both, with joint patrols to try and counter the ever

growing migration of monsters from the north, and new trade deals were being set up on a daily basis.

The ceremony was held on neutral ground, rather oddly, in almost the same spot that Gisel and I had first met. It was about halfway I guess, and the ground there was a little more open, thanks to me flattening most of the trees practicing my magic!

There had even been a small stage constructed. It was rather crude, but was solid enough, and easily held the mayor, the goblin chief and their aids, one of which was Lissa, as a representative of the temple and Blessed Mother. I stood to one side, with Rath holding my hand, next to Hungerford and Freia.

As with all these sorts of things, it was a fairly boring affair, with speeches from the various important people, followed, finally, by a document signing and exchange. There was loud applause and cheers though, once it was done, which showed the support from both sides for the deal. I was rather pleased, things generally didn't work out this well.

There was one last thing. The 'hostage' exchange. It was phrased more politely of course, as a cultural ambassador role, but we all knew what it really was.

Still, it was the thing I was most pleased about. I had, somehow, managed to facilitate Gisel's wish to visit the human lands. I just hoped it would work out as well as she thought it would. The village probably wouldn't be a problem, but the feelings at the academy may be another issue. After all, that had been set up almost exclusively to *fight* demons.

And so, when we headed back home, Gisel was with us. Even though she put up a brave front, I could tell she was nervous, so I tried my best to distract her, keeping up a running commentary of the sights, such as they were, on the way. I think she appreciated it.

As for Lissa, Rath, Freia and Hungerford, I was not really sure of their true feelings, but I could guess that Lissa would be kind and welcoming, that was just her nature, and Rath would be more guarded, but still polite. Hungerford was impossible to read, but I doubted he would be anything but proper.

Freia turned out to be an unexpected ally though. She was unabashedly curious about the goblin culture and way of life, and peppered Gisel with questions, some of which were not very appropriate I thought, although Gisel didn't seem to mind, and was quite forthcoming with her answers.

When Gisel first had a glimpse of our house, she gasped.

"It's so large!" she said, in beast talk. "Are all man-crea... human houses so?"

"No, we are lucky," Rath replied, in the same tongue. "This is larger than most."

I raised an eyebrow, it shouldn't have surprised me she could speak the language, but for some reason it did.

"It's so beautiful," Gisel added, switching to human, as she took in the front garden, and the flowers. "Oh, you have some starbells!" She squatted, to take a sniff of some bright yellow flowers that were planted along the fence.

"Hungerford maintains the garden," Lissa said.

Gisel stood up and gave Hungerford a slight bow. "You do a wonderful job sir," she said.

Wow, I thought. *Someone has been taking lessons in diplomacy!*

"It's a hobby, I am glad you appreciate them," Hungerford replied.

We went on, and I was allowed to give Gisel a tour of the house, although Freia also tagged along, including the room that Lissa and Rath had allocated her.

"This is for... me?" Gisel looked wide eyed at the spacious room. It had a decent sized bed against one wall, a dressing table and chair, a wardrobe and bookcase, which was empty.

"Of course," Freia said. "Is it acceptable?"

"It's larger than my fathers' tent," she replied, walking over to the bed and prodding it. "So soft. I'm likely to sink into it."

"I think it will be all right," I said.

She just looked at me, with those big amber eyes of hers. "Thank you."

"I'm glad to be able to help. I gave her a small bow.

"Come on you two," Freia said, spoiling the mood. "Dinner will be served soon. Gisel, leave your things here, you can unpack later. You should leave your knives here too. Lissa doesn't like weapons at the dinner table."

"Oh, yes."

We waited until Gisel had placed her knives carefully on the dressing table, a process that took a few minutes, she was a walking armoury, and then headed to the dining room where the adults were waiting.

"Welcome Gisel," Lissa said. She gestured at the seat next to mine. "Please sit."

"Thank you."

I was a little afraid that Gisel would grab food and start to stuff her face, I had seen that was pretty much the goblin way the few times I had visited the village, but this didn't happen. She waited until Lissa had said a prayer to the Blessed Mother, although I noted she didn't join in, and then used the chopsticks and spoon provided, albeit a little awkwardly, to eat.

"Gisel, I saw your knives. How good are you?" Freia said, after a short period of mastication.

"My master has trained me since I could stand. I am good, better with the throwing knives, but he said I show promise in close knife work too. With my size I use a style called..." Here she said a word in her own language that I hadn't learned.

"That would equate to our Sly style," Hungerford said, nodding. "Makes sense. I would like to see you in action if that is acceptable."

"Of course!" Gisel smiled happily at the thought of getting to use her knives.

"Changing the subject slightly," Rath said. "Do you have any other clothes?"

"I have another tunic," she replied.

"We will need to go into the village then, and buy you some more attire." Rath looked at Lissa, who nodded. "If you are to come with us to the academy, you will need to present yourself in a more suitable outfit."

"This is not suitable?" Gisel looked down at what she was wearing, which consisted of a rather worn top with sleeves torn short, and breeches that came down just below her knees, which had several holes in. She was wearing some sandals today, but I had seen her barefoot as often as not.

"The academy can be a stuffy place," Lissa interjected. "You need to look the part. There are many there who come from wealthy families." She paused a second, before carrying on. "I am afraid that there are some who are rather... arrogant. They will look down on you given any opportunity. Sorry, I wasn't going to bring this up just yet."

"It is okay," Gisel said, using my English word again. "My advisor has spoken to me of this. I am prepared to face it. I am also prepared to defend myself." She bared her teeth.

"I would expect nothing less." Rath nodded. "However, please try not to get into a fight unless you have to."

Gisel poked at the meat on her plate before answering.

"I shall try not to kill anyone needlessly," she finally said.

Holiday's End.

I was allowed to watch Gisel's demonstration of her knife skills, which she did on one of Hungerford's infernal assault courses. Watching her leap and dive through obstacles whilst skewering targets that moved or popped up, I realised how agile and skilled she really was.

Hungerford seemed impressed too.

"A few areas you could improve a little," he said, when she had finished, and was standing there, panting, in front of him. "However, for your age that was excellent. Now, how about your close combat work? Come at me."

She didn't need to be told twice. I suspect she was a bit mad at the 'few areas to improve' comment, because she launched herself at him at once, throwing two small knives in advance of her attack, which Hungerford batted away almost absent-mindedly.

As fast and nimble as Gisel was, she simply couldn't get a strike on the man, even with a dagger in each hand, something I could have told her would (or wouldn't) happen, from my own experience, and from seeing him spar with Freia and Rath.

"Arrgg!" she shouted, as her attacks were simply avoided, time after time. Only once did Hungerford knock one of her knives away with his stick.

Finally he stopped defending and, moving so fast you couldn't even see him, swung his stick and knocked her through the air. She landed some metres away, rolling over in a semi-controlled fall.

"Very good." He looked at me. "Did you see how she landed? One of your weak areas."

I ran over to Gisel, who was lying on her back on the grass, panting hard.

"That man is impossible," she gasped, as I extended a hand, grunting as I pulled her up. I grunted. I'd forgotten she was so much heavier than she looked.

"He's much older and experienced," I pointed out.

"I will beat him one day though." She scowled and glared at Hungerford, who was chatting with Rath and Lissa.

"I think you need to join the queue for that."

Gisel looked at me then, and suddenly laughed. "I guess I'm not as invincible as I like to think."

"Yeah, welcome to my world."

~~~

The next day I was let off training, as Lissa and Rath had announced that we would be going into the village to buy some equipment for Gisel. I would be allowed to accompany the party, mainly because I also needed some new clothes before we returned to the academy.

"You've grown a lot," Lissa said, hugging me so hard I couldn't breathe.

"I'm still small."

"No rush," Rath commented, walking up. "Enjoy your childhood whilst you can."

I'd heard that before, in my last life. This time though, I knew what she meant. I remember looking in the mirror one day, back on the old world, and wondering where my youth had gone.

So, the four of us walked into the village, past the baker's, which was my boundary still, although I'd not really visited in a while, and then down a side street.

"We're going to see an old friend of mine," Rath said, when I asked how far it would be. "Don't be afraid of him, he's a gentle chap really."

*That doesn't sound at all ominous.* "What does he do?"

"He's a Master Smith. He makes weapons and armour of all sorts. We're really incredibly lucky to have someone as skilled as him in such a small village. He came here to retire, but still does a bit of work, more to keep his hand in and have something to do than make money. I've asked him to make something for you Theo. It should be ready by now. I'm sure he won't mind outfitting Gisela either. You should call him Master Greaves."

Master Greave's workshop turned out to be on the edge of the village, in a fenced off area. There was a fairly nice cottage, behind which was a large yard filled with metal sheets, rods, scraps and even old, broken and bent, weapons. To the rear was another structure, one half of which was stone, and the other with two sides open to the elements. Under the roof I could see an anvil, a large set of bellows and some kind of furnace next to a work bench, cluttered with all manner of tools.

"Master Greaves, are you here?" Rath shouted, as we approached.

A moment later, the door in the other half of the structure opened, and a man squeezed out of it.

I took a step back. Gisela made a whimpering sound and hid behind Lissa.

The man, and I only use the term because he was human in form, was the largest person I had ever seen.

"Hello Rath, Lissa!" the giant boomed, stepping over towards us and blotting out the sun. "And who is this? Surely not your lad? He's a fine chap!"

I bent over backwards, literally, and stared up at him, mouth hanging open. He must have been as tall, and as wide, as two normal men. You could tell he wasn't young, a mass of grey hair flopping about on his head, and tied behind him in a ponytail that rested over his shoulder. He had a long grey beard, also braided. Intelligent eyes gleamed down at me from a strong, rugged face.

He was clad in dark breeches and was wearing a leather apron with nothing underneath. His arms bulged with muscles that were larger than I was.

"Hello lad, what's your name then?" he boomed.

"I... I..." I pulled myself together. As intimidating as he was, he seemed friendly enough. Like a bear who wasn't hungry maybe. "I am Theobald sir giant. Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Sir Giant is it? *Mwhahahaha!*" The smith held his sides and laughed uproariously. "I like you my tiny friend! Oh, and you have someone else here!" He had spotted Gisela, peering out from behind Lissa. "Welcome to our village ambassador!"

Gisela took a deep breath and stepped out of cover. She gave a shallow bow. "Thank you Master Smith. Hello to you too."

"So polite." He looked back at Rath. "You are here for your order I take it?"

"If it is ready," Rath nodded. "And also, we wish to get some light armour, maybe a few knives for our visitor too."

"It would be an honour, step this way please."

We followed him to his forge, and then waited whilst he threw open a chest and reached in, pulling out a black wooden box, which he presented, with both hands, to me. He had to squat to do it.

“For me?” I asked, eyes wide.

“From your mothers.”

“I... thank you.” I took the box with both hands and stared at it. It was made of dark wood, with a silver inlay.

Greaves coughed. “The present is actually inside.”

I blushed. “Sorry, but, it’s a nice box!” I set it down on the anvil and opened it. “Oh, wow.”

Within, resting in carved slots was a black sheath and a straight dagger, inlaid with silver etching and inscribed with a line of writing on the blade. I gasped.

Taking it by the hilt, which was wrapped in black leather, I picked it out and held it up, admiring the craftsmanship. Even though it was just a long dagger, it was about the size of a short sword for me. I tried to read the inscription, but it was in a language I didn’t recognise.

“We will not tell you what it says,” Lissa said, when I looked up at her. “You will have to learn the language to read it.”

“What script is it?”

“You can find that out yourself too.” Rath tittered, a very girly sound, unusual for her.

I swung the weapon around a little, being careful where I waved it. The balance was superb.

Remembering my manners, I bowed again, first to the smith, and then to my mothers. “Thank you for this wonderful gift. I shall treasure it.”

“We hope you will not have to use it in anger,” Lissa said. “However, I have a feeling that wish will not come to pass, and so may it help protect yourself, your allies, and your loved ones for many years to come.”

All emotional all of a sudden, I could feel tears welling up, so I bowed again, to give me time to blink a few times, and then slid my new blade into the sheath, which I then attached to my belt. Now I felt like a proper adventurer!

Whilst I had been rearranging myself, Master Greaves had been speaking to Rath and Gisel. As he took measurements and notes, I wandered around his workshop, being careful not to touch anything, fascinated at being in an actual, real-life blacksmith’s forge.

Thirty minutes or so later, we said our farewells to the giant man. Rath had placed an order with him for Gisel, which he said would be ready before we headed back to the academy.

“Right then,” Lissa said, taking my hand. “To our next stop, then we can have a bite to eat I think, before heading back.”

“Where is our next stop mother?”

“I promised you some new clothes. Your mother wanted to get you some light armour, but I feel something of a different style would suit you more.”

She wouldn’t say anything else, and so we trooped along more roads, back to the main street, and then down another alley, to a small shop. At least I think it was a shop. There was no display in the window, and no sign overhead.

Lissa didn’t knock though, just pushed open the door and entered.

I found myself surrounded by clothes. Robes, tunics, cloaks and all manner of garments were hung, stacked, folded and draped around me, apparently with no thought to any order.



"Youngster!" An older woman, wearing a plain black dress, burst out of a doorway in the back of the shop and hugged Lissa. I raised my eyebrows. She had a long nose, and thin face with dark eyes. I looked down to see if she was wearing sparkling red shoes, just to confirm that she wasn't in fact, the Wicked Witch of the West. Nope, black boots. Maybe she wasn't wearing the ruby slippers right now.

"Is this the lad then? How darling!" She swooped down on me like a large bat and picked me up with no apparent effort, twisting me from side to side and examining me like a piece of merchandise.

"Yes, yes, the perfect size, as predicted!" she cackled, putting me back down. "Wait a second."

I looked up at my mother with a questioning expression on my face.

"Grettle makes wonderful garments," Lissa explained. "And because she is a spirit user, they will have a little something extra embedded in them."

"A spirit user?" I frowned. Spirit magic was one of the types of magic I had read about, but knew nothing of what it did yet.

"People who can wield spirit magic are very rare," Lissa said. "It is used to imbue items, clothes, weapons, anything really, with magical power. Well, amongst other things."

"You can make magic items?" I gasped. Fantastic! Then I frowned to myself. Wait, I had made some magic items myself. My purse and bag of holding. Did that mean I was a spirit user? No, that had been Transposition magic. I had only cast a spell onto the purse and bag, not infused it with mana.

"Here we go!" Grettle exploded back into the room, various garments draped over her arms. "Now lad, try these on." She lay several items on a nearby table.

The first thing I saw was some underwear, slightly embarrassing but needed. However, there were also two sets of breeches. One in dark blue and one black. Two tunics of matching colours were next to those, then there was a pair of black boots, ankle high with a turned over top, and for me, the *pièce de resistance* – a wonderful black cloak.

Grinning madly. I grabbed the cloak and swirled it about me. I had always loved cloaks, and yet, back in my old world, they were just not in fashion, much to my chagrin.

"Excellent!" I said, attaching the clasp. "How wonderful!" I posed in front of a nearby mirror, placed there just for such an event no doubt.

"The lad has taste," Grettle said, smiling at my enthusiasm. "It has a few small enchantments within it," she informed me. "Resistance to heat, cold and attack, and the power of warming. Nothing too powerful, but every little helps, yes? I've made it a little long, so it can last you a while. I know how young boys grow."

"Thank you madam Grettle," I said, bowing to her. Now I had a weapon at my side and proper garb!

"Thank your mothers," she responded.

I did so, bowing again to my mothers, who were both grinning madly. Even Gisela was smiling.

Of course, I was made to try the tunic and breeches too, all of which fit well. Luckily, they didn't insist I try on the underwear. There was no changing room.

When I left the shop I was wearing my new cloak, and carrying a bag with the rest of the items in. Rath and Lissa took us to a small restaurant, where they were made a big fuss of, which meant both myself and Gisela were also made a big fuss of, and we ate a sumptuous meal. I was even allowed to have some cake.

Tired and quite happy, we finally headed back towards home, only for someone to call my name out just past the baker's shop.

"Theo! Hello!"

We stopped as a small figure, well, a little smaller than me, ran up to us.

"Marie!" I said. "Hello again."

"Theo," the young lass beamed. She had grown since I'd last seen her, but otherwise seemed the same. Maybe her hair was a little longer. "You said you would come and play!" She pouted.

"And who is this cutie?" Lissa asked, smiling down. "Theo, you didn't say you had a friend in the village."

"I'm sorry Marie," I said. "I've just been busy, with my training and everything."

"You forgot me then?" Marie made a face.

"No no, I didn't forget. I'm sorry I've not visited."

"Well, as long as you're sorry." She perked right back up. "Do you want a lollypop?"

I remembered the pre-sucked sticky thing from last time. "Er, no thank you, we've just eaten."

"Who's this?" Marie pointed at Gisel.

"I'm Gisel."

"You're green."

"I know this."

"Do you want to play too?"

"What are we playing?"

"I don't know. Maybe running? Do you like running?" Marie beamed.

"It depends on what I'm running from, or to." Gisel scratched her head.

"I promise we will try and find time to visit and play." I decided to interrupt this riveting conversation. "But we're going back to school soon, so we may not have a chance."

"I like school," Marie said, apparently unphased.

"I'm sorry lass, but we have to get going," Rath said. "I'm sure Theo will visit, if not this year, then the next one. Can you wait that long?"

"I guess I can," Marie said.

"Good girl." Rath patted her on the head, making Marie giggle.

"See you!" I waved at her, as we were ushered along once more.

"Study hard at school. I will too!" she shouted back.

"What a cute little girl," Lissa said. "You should try and make more friends."

"Yes mother," I replied. Mentally I tried to imagine Marie as a teenager. Maybe *then* I'd be interested in playing with her!

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The remainder of my mothers' vacation time flew by. I continued my training with Hungerford, who pitted me against Gisel in a number of different sparring matches. It was good to have someone of my own size to train with, although I did acquire a number of, reasonably minor, injuries. She was not as skilled, or didn't hold back perhaps, like Hungerford did. As Lissa was with us, that wasn't a

problem. She healed me when needed, although for the bruises and small stuff she said I could recover as nature intended.

Gisel, now with new clothes, including a set of light armour and even more straps to hold even more knives provided by our giant blacksmith, was a good match for me.

She was a little older, and quite a lot stronger than I was, and her agility was just about a match for me, even using my wind magic. I could beat her up close, especially with swords, but she usually beat me when we were in a distance fight, although I think if I had been allowed to use more powerful magic, that wouldn't have been the case. Hungerford was really good at creating different scenarios though, which didn't give either of us too big an advantage.



"You need to be flexible," he lectured. "It could be that you can't rely on magic for some reason, which means you will have to figure out other ways to overcome problems. Do not fall into the trap of narrow thinking. Always try and have a backup plan, and use different skills and methods. Outwit an enemy however you can, even if it means striking unexpectedly."

"Isn't that rather dishonourable?" I asked.

For way of reply, he spat on the ground. "That for honour. The only thing you need to do is be the one who can walk away. And if that means running from a fight, do that. If you live, you can try again. Dead, well, that's it."

Sound advice, which actually matched my philosophy.

Freia wasn't in total agreement though.

"But the honour of a warrior is something that contributes to their standing!" she complained.

"If you are speaking of promises made, and so forth, I don't disagree," Hungerford replied. "Even in a practice bout, there is room for honour. For real war, for a real, to the death fight though, the winner takes all. Don't forget that."

Freia made a face, but nodded. She was still young enough to fall for the bard's tales of glory, I suspected. No doubt if I was only as old as my body, I would be the same. Experience was the one thing that changed your outlook, and I carried mine from my previous life.

I did see Marie once more, but I arranged it so I didn't have 'time' to run around and play with her. She was still too young to interest me, but it's always good to put in some groundwork for when that wouldn't be the case. So I met her and took her to the baker's, and bought her a few cakes and treats, and also one for her brother this time.

She was very excited to have these. I had the feeling her family wasn't so well off, and couldn't afford such things. I added a few more baked goods, and told her to give them to her mother, apparently her father was no longer in the picture, and she promised she would.

As a final gesture of goodwill, I also gave her my small purse of holding as a present. I never really used it, as I had my larger bag. She was thrilled with that, and gave me a kiss on the cheek as a reward. I took that as a promise of more to come when we were older, and breathed a little harder at the thought.

And so the time to return to the academy grew close.

Hungerford drove us mercilessly in our final few days of training, running us ragged with exercises and drills for most of the day. I went to bed exhausted each night. I think Gisel felt the same too.

And finally the day came.

"We're ready," Lissa called, from the wagon.

Gisel, having already said goodbye to Freia and Hungerford, climbed aboard. She was wearing her new armour, and no doubt had about five hundred knives strapped about her person.

I turned to Freia, who was standing next to Hungerford to see us off. Why not? I thought. I ran to her and hugged her.

“Hey!” she said, shocked at first, but then relented and hugged me back, kissing me on the head before pushing me away. “Go on, you pervert,” she said, but in a nice tone.

Guess I’d been made then.

Stepping to the side, I gave Hungerford a deep bow. “Thank you master, for all your training.”

“I’ve only just started,” he said. “Next time I’m not going to be so soft, so you better keep in shape.”

“I will master.” With another bow to both of them, I grinned widely and blasted myself upwards with my wind magic. I did a backwards summersault high in the air, and landed on the seat of the wagon, next to Lissa, who gave me a clip around the ear for it.

Still, *worth it*.

How Dungeons are Born.

It felt like a totally different journey to when I had arrived. Of course, the main difference was that Gisel was with us, which meant I had someone to talk to other than my mothers. She enjoyed sitting on the back of the wagon, legs swinging back and forth, looking at the scenery go by, which was understandable, given that this was her first real venture into human lands, other than the village a few times.

Lissa and Rath were both in a good mood as well. I’m sure they both loved being on the farm, but both of them were still fairly young, and they were used to a life of travel and adventure, and I think they were a bit restless. Maybe they were only staying at the academy because of me. I resolved to have a discussion about this with them at some point. They shouldn’t be held back from enjoying life whilst they could. I would say you only live once, but that may be a little hypocritical coming from me.

Halfway through the first day of travel, as I sat next to Gisel looking at the world go by, I frowned.

“Mother?” I called back to Lissa, who was busy cooking something on the travel stove.

“What is it sweetie?” she asked.

“Are we going the same way as before?”

“Aren’t you the observant one now? No, the road we usually travel on is being repaired. It took some damage after the snow last winter, so we’re using another route, this one is further north, but it should be nearly as fast. You may even get to spot the Great Lake at one point. It’s north of El, and the Demon realm lies on the other side.”

“I thought the Demon lands were north of Silfen?”

“Well, the two are connected, so I’ve heard. However, the lands north of Silfen are wilder, according to what people have told me, and just inhabited by scattered tribes here and there. Whereas the Demon Realm, to the east of them is actually ruled by the head demon, king, whatever they have, and more organised. Perhaps there is more than one realm actually. I don’t really know a lot about that area.

“I see.” I mulled over the geography that I knew. For example, the forest where Gisel’s village was located apparently ran for many leagues north, and was unclaimed by any human or near-human

ruler. To the west of that, and to the current north of us, was the Great Lake. On its western shore was the vast mountain range called the Dragon's Teeth, and on the north shore, then, was the Demon Realm.

"Have you ever been to the Demon Realm?" I asked Gisel.

She shook her head. "No, my tribe occasionally moves within the forest, but I think we tend to stay close to the southern edge. My father said that deeper in there are too many dangerous beasts."

"Good to know. I shall avoid taking any picnics there."

We camped before sundown, a little early, so Rath explained, but this was the best spot for a while. It was a clearing a little distance from the road, hidden behind a small hill.

The night passed uneventfully, and we set off early the next morning. Before very long we crossed a stone bridge that spanned a decent sized river flowing south.

"This comes from the Great Lake," Rath informed me, and heads down through El to flow into the Eastern Sea. Just south of that is Freehaven, where your mother was born. We shall visit there one day."

"I would like that," I said.

The journey continued, along a fairly narrow road, which consisted mostly of packed dirt, and was hence rather less comfortable than the paved one we had come the other way on.

About midday though, the wagon stopped.

"Hello?" I heard Lissa say, and scrabbled forward to see what was going on, followed by Gisel. Rath had jumped out of the back.

"Please..." the man on the road was saying. "Please, help!"

The fellow was obviously in bad shape. He was, maybe, in his thirties, with dark hair and a matching beard, dressed in a fairly simple cream tunic and brown breeches, with practical looking strong boots. He was only armed with a knife at his side, which was a fairly common thing in this world.

However, his tunic was stained with a large amount of blood. As we watched he fell to his knees, gasping for breath and holding his stomach.

Lissa showed no hesitation. She jumped down and approached the man. "Hold still," she ordered.

I looked left and right. Was this an ambush? It didn't seem likely, but you could never tell. Perhaps I should say something. Then I saw Rath, off to one side. She had her hand on her sword hilt, and was scanning the area with keen eyes. Of course my mothers were not that naïve, they would consider such a thing.

Lissa said her healing prayer, holding the man still until she finished. I saw the goddess's white mana converge on the wound area, and he gasped in both shock and relief, and collapsed to the ground.

"Thank you Blessed!" he said. "Thank you!"

"You are welcome," Lissa replied. "We are all the Mother's children after all. Now, tell me, how did this happen?"

Her question seemed to jog the memory of the man, who sat up urgently once more. "*Please!*" he said. "You have to help! Our village is under attack by monsters! Children have been snatched, and people have been hurt and killed. We are a small village, with only a few guards, they can't cope. We urgently need assistance."

"Where are you based?" Rath said, stepping forward.

The man jerked, not having spotted her before, but quickly recovered. "We are just to the north, by

the coast. A small fishing community, a bit of farming. They came out of the forest to the east. It's only about an hour by wagon, maybe less."

Lissa and Rath exchanged glances, and then nodded at each other.

"Very well," Rath said. "Get on board the wagon, you can guide us."

"Thank you, thank you!" the man wailed.

"You can thank us afterwards, just get on the wagon." Rath helped him climb up, and Lissa once more took the reins. Rath stayed by the wagon, and jogged alongside as we started to move.

"What's your name?" Lissa asked.

"It's Richards... oh!" he spotted Gisel and myself in the rear.

"Don't be frightened," Lissa said. "She's with us. She won't hurt you. Her name is Gisel, and the boy is Theo, our son."

"I... I... Very well. Hello master Theo, miss Gisel." The man performed an awkward, half sitting bow.

"Hello Mister Richards," both Gisel and I replied.

"Take this lane here," Richards said, directing his attention to the fore again, and pointing at a small offshoot heading north. "It leads directly to the village."

We did as he said, and the journey became even less smooth.

"What type of monsters are they?" Lissa asked, navigating carefully around some large holes.

"Spiders," he said. "Giant spiders. Some as large as a horse, their bodies at least. They killed two guards, injured both the other hunters who helped them. At least four young children were taken. We don't know why, but we fear the worst."

"They lay eggs in them," Rath said, appeared to the left of the wagon. "But they can still be saved if we get to them in time."

"By the Mother!" wailed Richards.

"How long ago were they snatched?" Lissa asked.

"Only a day, less even."

"Then there's hope." Lissa cracked the whip, spurring the oxen on to greater speed.

The next hour was tense. Gisel and I kept watch to the rear. She had her hands on her daggers, whilst I went through my spells, preparing myself, just in case. I had recently worked on a couple of new incantations for combat use, but hadn't had chance to practice them yet.

"The village is just over this rise," Richards said, as we neared the top of a hill. "You will be able to... Oh!"

Gisel and I scrambled forward, to see a small cluster of buildings, not far ahead.

There was trouble. Several men could be seen fighting two gigantic black spiders, blue lines decorating their abdomens. Even as I watched, one of the human figures, ineffectually wielding an old polearm, was stabbed through the torso by one of the spiders' legs, which had a spear-like tip to them.

"No!" wailed Richards. "No!"

"Hang on," Lissa growled, whipping the oxen to a faster pace. "Theo, Gisel, stay in the wagon, but keep a lookout!"

"Yes mother," I said, as I saw Rath running full speed into the fight.

I'd never really seen my mother in battle before, not properly I mean. The incident with the bandits on the way to our farm had been fought out of my view. The only other times I'd seen her wield a sword was with Freia, and very occasionally, Hungerford.

Those times, as impressive as they were, couldn't compare to Rath in anger.

About ten metres away from the nearest spider, she jumped, summersaulting through the air, and landing on the spider's back. With a colossal swing, she sliced down and severed the beast in two, leaping back off it again even as it was screeching its death.

She landed in front of the second spider, which turned its attention to her, stabbing with two of those deadly legs. It may as well not have bothered. With a quick slice left and right, they were hacked off, spurting blue ichor over the road. Before the severed parts had even hit the floor, Rath was running underneath the great arachnid, sword held above her, slicing through the chitin, and cutting the monster down the middle.

With a horribly human wail, the second spider collapsed.

I saw Rath stand there for a second, dead still, sword raised, scanning the area for other threats. None found, she calmly wiped her blade on a cloth carried for such a purpose, and sheathed it.

"Your mum is amazing," Gisel gasped, eyes wide.

I nodded. The whole thing had taken about ten seconds. Ten seconds to completely devastate two enormous, deadly spiders.

Lissa, having reached the scene of the battle, leaped to the ground, showing an acrobatic ability equal to that of Rath's, and ran over to the stabbed man, who was lying in a pool of his own blood. Pushing a wailing woman villager out of the way, she knelt over him, held her hands on the wound, and began chanting.

Again, I saw the holy mana coalesce, but this time in much greater quantities. It had barely started to form though, when it suddenly blinked out of existence.

I heard Lissa swear, something that she rarely did, and hang her head. Sighing, she reached up to the man's eyes, closing them. Only then did she look up, at the woman she had pushed aside earlier.

"I am sorry," she said, as the villager exploded into tears. "He has joined our Blessed Mother."

Standing, she allowed the woman to fall onto the dead man, wailing and sobbing. Lissa, taking a deep breath, looked around. "Is there anyone injured?"

There were none. It seemed our rescue had been, almost, in time. My mothers were swarmed by the grateful fishermen, and their families, who, in turn, were pushed aside moments later as a burly middle aged man, a sword at his side, ran up to join them.

"Blessed!" he said. "Warrior! My greatest thanks for your assistance! I am the mayor here, name is Tailor Vist."

"Mayor, I am sorry we didn't arrive sooner." Lissa gestured at the dead man.

"Oh no, not Wolsey!" The mayor shook his head sadly. "Please, excuse me one second Blessed." He walked over to the woman, who was still sobbing and lying on the body, and squatted down next to her, muttering some words of condolence no doubt.

Rath trotted up to the wagon. "Are you two all right?"

"Yes mother," I replied.

"You were amazing!" Gisel gushed.

"It was no great feat," Rath said. "Whilst they look fearsome, they are a fairly low level beast."

I looked over again at the spiders, and gasped. "They're melting!" I said.

Indeed they were. The two monsters had become mere puddles of bluish goo on the ground, their shape almost totally lost. Even as I watched, the goo itself began to steam and evaporate. A minute later, there was no sign they ever existed, with the exception of two blue shards of crystal.

"What are they?" I asked. Both shards were pulsating with energy to my view.

"They are heartstones, also called mana stones," Rath replied, walking over and picking them both up. She came back and handed one to me, the other to Gisel. It was surprisingly heavy, and slightly warm to the touch. "When you kill a monster, like these, their essence returns to the dungeon realm from whence it came, leaving behind the stone that attracted it to this dimension in the first place.

"I don't understand," I said. "So, if one of Gisel's tribe was killed...?"

"No!" Gisel scowled, "we are nothing like these creatures."

"They are not the same. Let me explain."

"Please do," I said.

"This." Rath tapped my heartstone, "is made of concentrated mana. For some reason, which no one really understands, a large mass of it sometimes forms, nearly always underground. This mana is so dense it becomes solid, and evolves, becoming aware, alive in a way. It usually manifests as an underground structure, small at first, but if left unchecked it grows and expands."

"You're talking about a dungeon!" I gasped. It seemed watching anime was paying off at last.

"People call them that, yes. If left alone for a while, and as they are usually underground at that point, most are, then even more mana takes form, as heartstones within the dungeon. These stones attract beings from other dimensions, like a lure to a fish. Because these things usually spawn inside dungeons, their home dimensions are referred to as the dungeon dimensions. They break through into our universe and grow around a mana stone, which becomes, essentially, their heart.

"Hence the name," I said.

"Indeed. Some stones are small, with less mana, and these become the lesser beasts. Others are larger and more powerful, which become the tougher monsters. Also, if a monster eats other heartstones, it can grow in strength, size, and even intelligence."

"And so the dungeons are inhabited by monsters," Gisel added.

"That is correct," Rath went on. "The heartstones are valuable, and hence sought after. They can be used in the creation of magic potions, powders, spells, and even artefacts. I shall give that one to you Theo. Gisel, you may have the other."

"Thank you!" we both said.

"So, is there a dungeon near here then?" Gisel asked.

"Given that we have dropped heartstones, and these attacks have only just started, I'd say a new dungeon has grown enough to reach the surface, and these spiders have come from it. There are other less likely options, but let's find out more information. Wait here for a moment please."

We nodded, and she walked off towards Lissa, who was speaking to the villagers.

"If you didn't get it from your mother," Gisel turned and said to me, "we demon races are not from those dungeon dimensions. We were here first, so perhaps *you* are the dungeon dimension monsters."

I'd obviously touched a nerve.

"I'm sorry Gisel. I spoke without thinking."

"Mmf." She sniffed, but said nothing more, and we both waited as my mothers spoke to the villagers, including the mayor, who had directed some men to carry off the poor dead Wolsey.

After what seemed like a fairly heated discussion, with lots of pointing towards the east, Rath and Lissa both nodded, and climbed back into the wagon with us.

"So?" I asked, as they both sat there and looked at us for a moment, without saying anything.

"I still don't like it," was all Lissa said, to Rath.

"We've been over this, leaving them here will be no safer," my other mother replied. "And I think they are more than capable of taking down these monsters, with our support."

"What are you talking about?" Gisel scowled, although I was beginning to get an idea.

"Congratulations," Rath said, by way of a reply. "You're going to join us for your first monster hunt!"

Dungeons and Arachnids.

"What?" Gisel gasped.

"The village has hired us to hunt down these spiders, and rescue their missing children," Lissa explained. "It's likely they are coming in from a newly surfaced dungeon."

"We're going dungeon delving?" I gasped.

"Yes," Rath went on. "Under the supervision of your mother and me. There are still spider attacks on the village happening at intervals, as you just saw. If we leave you here you may have to face them on your own. I believe you will actually be safer with us, even though we shall encounter more of them."

"Theo, prepare your spells, or whatever you do. Spiders, and their webs, are particularly vulnerable to fire, as a rule at least. However, if we enter a dungeon you need to be careful of the limited space, I do not wish to be fried."

"I shall be careful," I said, my mind racing through the spells I had prepared.

"Gisel, you shall be up front with me. You are to stay close. Do not, under any circumstances, leave my vicinity. Do you understand?"

"Yes master." Gisel nodded.

"You should try and focus on the smaller spiders. You saw what I did earlier. Be careful of their front legs especially, but they also can have large pincers, and some types can be venomous. Avoid being bitten, although Lissa should be able to heal it, and I shall give you a vial of antidote. We only have two vials with us, so use them only if you really need to. Your throwing daggers will be less effective here, but if you do use them, aim for the main eyes."

"As you say master." Gisel bowed her head.

"Theo," Rath turned to me. "You shall be support, with your mother. Your task will be to ensure no monsters come up from behind us, and also protect Lissa. Remember to keep an eye above too, spiders tend to drop down on you. Watch your own rear as well. If you are casting spells, don't get excited and start blasting everywhere. Conserve your strength, choose your targets carefully. *And don't hit us!*"

"As you say mother." I nodded.

Rath took a deep breath, and looked at Lissa, who nodded. "Very well then, you have five minutes to prepare."

"Aye!" Both Gisel and I scrambled back into the wagon to get ready.

~*~

Ten minutes later we were heading east, through the village, towards the forested area where the spiders had come from, according to reports.

We had barely started off when two smaller spiders scuttled towards us. They looked the same as the ones Rath had dealt with earlier, but were only about the size of a large dog, although their long legs made them look even larger.

"Gisel, can you take these two?" Rath asked.

"Yes master!"

Without waiting another second, my young friend drew both her daggers and leaped forward to meet the attack, a blade in each hand. Just as it seemed she would collide with the monsters, she dived to the right, and slashed at the spider with her knife as she ran along.

The beast let out a high pitched shriek, as the legs on one side were severed. It fell sideways, unable to move properly. Gisel didn't stay still, she did an impressive cartwheel summersault and slashed at the body as she passed over it upside down.

"Impressive," I heard Rath mutter.

On the other side of the dying spider, she bounced once again, to land on the back of the second creature, and plunged both daggers into its head from above.

Chitin cracked, and with another squeal, the spider collapsed, ichor gushing from the deep wounds.

Gisel sprang off and landed clear, swinging around in a circle to make sure no other threats were manifest.

There were none. She nodded to herself, cleaned her blades, and sheathed them, as if killing dungeon monsters was something she did every day.

"Excellent work," Rath said.

Gisel beamed.

"But don't get overconfident, those were babies."

"Understood master."

"You may as well collect the heartstones," Lissa pointed out the two crystals in the rapidly evaporating remains. "However, don't stop to pick up loot whilst we're in the middle of a fight."

"Of course." Gisel looked offended that Lissa would say something so obvious.

"Well, I've seen it happen," Lissa muttered.

If I was jealous that Gisel had been allowed to fight on her own, I was soon given the chance to prove my own mettle.

We were just outside of the village, walking through a field of some kind of crop, when three more large spiders appeared from the treeline, which was some distance ahead of us.

"Theo, do you wish to see to these?" Lissa asked.

"Yes mother!"

I stepped forward and raised my hand. A ball of fire appeared above me. "*Firestorm!*" I shouted,

more for the look of the thing than any need.

Bringing my arm down I aimed at the spiders, sweeping my palm in a horizontal line across their path. Intense orange spheres of fire, the size of tennis balls, materialised in the air above the creatures and then rained down, slammed into the approaching trio.

The effects were gratifying beyond my expectations.

The first one simply blew up in an enormous explosion, creating a small mushroom cloud above it, and scattering spider-parts all around.

The other two were slightly less impressive, but no less effective, as the monsters collapsed under the impact of my attacks, and burst into flames. More high pitched screeches met our ears as they literally melted in front of our eyes.

"Oh, that was so satisfying," I said, lower my hand, a wide smile on my face. It was almost a relief to finally be able to let loose.

"Holy shit," I heard Rath say, under her breath. Then, in a louder voice. "Good work little one, but please don't use such force at close quarters. We'll all be incinerated in a forest fire."

"Oh, yes."

Parts of the woodland nearby were smouldering. Luckily it didn't seem to be spreading.

"I will use wind magic next time," I said. I had developed a spell I called Wind Blade, which I was eager to try.

"Let's keep moving," Rath said.

We headed over to the smoking craters that were all that was left of the spiders. I picked up one of the heartstones and put it in my bag as we went by. Then I frowned. Had the bugbear I killed in the woods dropped a stone, or was that not a dungeon dimension monster? No, it had not melted. So that was a demon monster then. I resolved to clarify this later.

For now, we approached the treeline, and Rath slowed our approach. She drew her sword, and Gisel pulled one of her own blades out. No doubt she was leaving the other hand free for throwing.

Lissa and I dropped back, allowing the front line to get clear.

"Ready?" Rath asked, without looking back.

"Go," Lissa responded.

At a slow and wary pace, we entered the woodland. Immediately things were harder. The sun shining through the foliage above meant visibility was impacted, and of course, the trees themselves blocked our view.

"To the right," Rath said, suddenly.

Gisel, who was beside her, on that side, swivelled and rushed a few steps forward, directly underneath a medium sized spider that had leaped out of nowhere. Copying Rath's technique from earlier, she ran forward with her dagger raised, slicing the underside of the thing.

It screeched, and fell to the ground, to be finished off by a thrust from Rath's sword.

Stepping around the body, which was already melting, Gisel took her place by Rath again. Both fighters stood still, scanning the area for a moment, before moving forward once again. Lissa and I followed.

Several more spiders attacked shortly after that, one from the rear, which Lissa put down with some kind of light arrow spell I'd never seen her use before.

From then on, the going became tougher, with the creatures approaching from all directions. Still,

they were spaced apart and we weren't overwhelmed, and none of them were very large. Rath and Gisel sliced and diced efficiently, working together as if they had been doing it for ages, whilst Lissa and I covered their rear. Lissa blasted them to the right, and I took out any from the left. I used another variant of my fireball spell, which fired a small, compressed, ball of fire that exploded on impact. It had the advantage of not setting a huge area ablaze, whilst at the same time being efficient in mana. I was able to fire off several shots rapidly as well, and two or three seemed to put an attacker down fairly quickly. Still, larger spiders were going to need something else.

Oh, I had named this one *Fire Bullet*. Maybe I was imagining it, but I think my spell names were improving.

"I think there's some kind of structure ahead," Rath called back, after about ten minutes of fairly heavy going. "We should..."

She was cut off as all hell broke loose.

Spiders, including a few huge ones, suddenly erupted from everywhere.

The four of us were pressed back, into a group, each of us facing a different direction. I let loose with a combination of *Fire Bullet* and my other new one – *Wind Blade*. I'd had the inspiration for these from the time with the bugbear. That time I'd blown a hole through the thing with a ball of compressed air. *Wind Blade* compressed it too, but into a kind of sharp boomerang shaped blade, which, so I found, sliced through spider very efficiently, sometimes taking two out in one go, if they were lined up.

Even so, I had to reduce the size of the 'blade' and spit them out in an almost machine-gun fashion, as the beasts lurched forward en-masse.

"Gisel!" I heard Rath scream.

Glancing back I saw Gisel had been wrapped in a mass of sticky thread, which had almost fully engulfed her. Even as I watched, she was yanked into the air, pulled by a line thrown from a different type of spider, a green one, that was perched in a tree.

I swung about, and let off a stream of *Fire Bullets*, trying to cut the line, but was abruptly interrupted, as my own body was engulfed in web.

"N..." I started to cry, trying to move, unsuccessfully, as the mass of grey threads wrapped around my head, cutting off sight, sound and, more urgently, air.

"Theo!" I heard Lissa scream, as I struggled to breathe. "We'll..."

I heard nothing else, and my world turned grey, and then black, as I lost consciousness.

~*~

My body couldn't move. What was going on? Was I late for training? Was Rath punishing me somehow? I opened my eyes.

Oh, yes. Spiders.

I found myself in complete darkness. Or was my head still engulfed in thread? No, there was nothing that I could feel, and I could breathe. Somehow that was more ominous than waking up dead, so to speak. My body was tightly bound, hands strapped to my sides, and legs wrapped up too. I wasn't standing on anything either.

And... Yes. There was a noise nearby. Breathing!

Let's see what's going on, I thought, and conjured a low level illumination spell.

The scene revealed wasn't very pretty. I was one of six small, tightly wrapped bodies hanging by threads from the ceiling of a plain room, constructed of stone blocks. Exactly the sort of room I had

imaged would be in a dungeon. I wasn't as thrilled to see this as I had hoped.

Next to me I could see Gisel, facing the other direction. The other four must be the missing children. Two looked older than me, maybe early teenagers, whilst one was maybe ten, and the last one smaller than me even.

None of them were moving about, but whether that was because they were dead, unconscious, or simply just hanging there, I couldn't tell from here.

"Gisel," I hissed. "Are you awake?"

Gisel twitched at the sound of my voice. "Yes! Get me out of this!"

"Right."

"Hurry!"

"Okay, hang on." *Haha*. "Let me think about this." The threads were bound about us quite tightly. I didn't have enough confidence in my Wind Blade spell to slice the web without cutting skin too. Maybe a very small fireball? But that might set us on fire too. Water? Would just make us wet.

Oh! I had an idea.

"Get ready," I hissed to Gisel.

Steadying myself, I concentrated and cast a spark at her. As I suspected, the web was quite flammable. It went up quickly, making it look like Gisel was totally ablaze, so I quickly cast a waterball, which doused the flames just as the threads gave way, dumping Gisel into a messy puddle on the stone floor.

"Ow! What was that?" She staggered to her feet, tearing the disintegrating web off her.

"Sorry, it seemed the fastest way to get you down. Do you have a knife? What am I saying, look who I'm talking to."

Shaking water off herself, Gisel stalked over to me and, swiftly and skilfully, cut my bindings. I fell to the ground with a thump.

"Ouch."

"Hey! Get me out too, please!"

"And me!"

Two of our fellow captives, seeing we were loose, called out in low voices. One was one of the larger forms, a boy by the sound of it, whilst the other was the small one, a girl. The other two were ominously quiet though.

A minute later, the boy, a large plump lad, and a young girl, maybe only three years old, were standing on the ground. The girl was sniffing, tears in her eyes.

"It's all right," I said, patting her head. "We're here to rescue you."

"I thought we were snatched by spiders," Gisel muttered, walking over to the fifth captive, and carefully slicing away.

"The results are the same," I retorted, moving over to her. The young girl held onto me, making movement slow.

"This one is unconscious," Gisel said, as the child slipped free of the web, and slid to the floor, only half caught by her.

"They came and stabbed her with something," the tubby boy said, voice quavering.

"Rath said they laid eggs in captives," I muttered. The young girl, hearing this, began to sob. "There

there." I patted her head again. "She also said it wasn't too late to save them. What are your names?"

"I'm Toby," the boy said.

"I'm Emma," the young lass replied, sniffing.

"Do you know these two?" I indicated the two other victims.

"I think the one on the floor is Ralph, I've seen him in school," Toby said. "Don't know the other girl."

"Hello Toby and Emma," I said. "I'm Theo, that's Gisel."

By this time Gisel had cut free the last victim. A slim girl, as Toby had said, maybe twelve or thirteen years old.

"We need to get out of here." I looked around. There was a doorway set in the middle of one wall, with a basic stone corridor running left to right beyond it, from what I could see. "Seems our choices are limited."

"What about these?" Gisel asked, indicating the unconscious children.

"Toby, can you carry the girl? You look strong," I asked.

Toby nodded. "I can carry her on my shoulders. My dad showed me how."

"Gisel, do you think you can manage the boy?"

She nodded, and hauled him up, slinging the poor lad over one shoulder. "Easy."

I always forgot how strong she was.

"Right, follow me. Toby, you're in the middle. Gisel, rear guard."

"Okay," she said.

I approached the doorway and, very carefully, peered out.

The corridor beyond was rough stone. Both ways disappeared into the gloom, but the floor to the left sloped very slightly upwards. Going on the basis we were underground, and out would be above us, I went left.

We crept along as quietly as possible, Emma trailed behind me, holding my hand. I had my light float above and behind me, for maximum visibility.

After an uneventful few minutes, we came to another T-junction. Again, the left path sloped slightly uphill. I started to move, but Gisel hissed, and I stopped and looked back at her.

"I can hear something," she mouthed slowly to me, pointing left.

Nodding, I turned about and spoke to Emma and the others in a low, low voice. "I'll scout ahead. You wait here."

Patting Emma on the head, and leaving my light behind, I moved up the passage alone, into the gloom, all the while trying to think small thoughts. There was a slight bend to the corridor, and so my view was limited.

However, as I moved on I could hear low sounds. Small squeals and chirp-like noises. Spider noises.

Slowly a room came into view. I dropped to the floor, and crawled like a worm along in the corner of the passage until I had a decent view.

The room was pretty massive. It must have been a good fifty metres long, twenty wide and twenty tall. And it was full.

Slithering in reverse, I made my way back to my little party to report.

"Well?" asked Gisel, as Emma clutched my hand again.

"There is good news and bad news," I said. "There's a room ahead, really big. Part of the roof has collapsed, and I can see plants around the edges of the hole, and sunlight filtering in, so we're close. There's a door on the opposite side of the room, which is slightly ajar. I think that's where we need to go.

"So, what's the bad news?" Toby asked.

"The room is full of spiders. And when I mean full, I mean there are dozens and dozens of them, of all sizes. A couple of those green web-slinger ones too. I seriously doubt we'd be able to fight them all off."

"What do we do then Mister Theo?" asked Emma.

"I'm going to check out the right corridor. You guys wait here again. Won't be long."

"Don't go far!" Gisel admonished.

"I won't."

I slipped away once more, heading down the passage this time, into the gloom. It became very dark very quickly, so I risked summoning another light, making it as tiny as I could.

This direction didn't feel right to me. A cold, dank breeze sprang up from ahead, which didn't smell of freedom, but, somehow, deep, underground darkness. I shivered.

Barely a minute along, I could hear a low muttering, in what sounded like human tongue, but garbled, as if a baby were speaking. Assuming the baby had a deep, rough voice that is.

I crept on, and two features came into view. Ahead the corridor seemed to vanish into blackness. The mumbling I could hear seemed to be coming from a large doorway to the left, along with a foul odour.

Moving really, really carefully I left my light behind and edged my way along the left wall, towards the doorway. I made a mental note to try and find out if invisibility was a spell, and to learn it if so.

Close now, I could see that the corridor just ahead vanished down a steep flight of dark, narrow stairs. The blackness that they led to wasn't at all inviting.

The doorway then. I slid to the ground and oh so slowly peered around, my head at floor level.

Beyond, dimly illuminated by some kind of fungi on the walls, was a large square, plain room, although it wasn't as large of the spider one. The place was littered with bones and rotting animal bits, including, I was slightly happy to see, spider parts.

And sitting against the back wall, legs akimbo, chewing on some kind of dark meat – I didn't wish to speculate – was a grotesque figure.

In shape, at least, it was human-ish, like a hugely distorted, bloated, fat child. He was wearing a crude fur around his waist, but apart from that he was naked, with a swollen, dirty and hairy belly sagging low, onto enormous thighs. A vast waterfall of a beard covered his lower face and tumbled over his man-boobs, whilst a matching head of hair exploded from his head, dribbling over his shoulders like an extreme 'before' photo for shampoo.

The giant had the expression of an idiot child, and appeared to be singing nonsense songs to himself. I estimated, standing, it would be at least four metres tall.

Quivering with terror at this horrific monster, I slid back, carefully stood up and fled back to my companions.

"And?" Gisel was obviously getting impatient.

"It's even worse, I think," I said, and explained what I had seen.

"So we're trapped then?" Toby said, lower lip quivering.

"What do we do mister Theo?" Emma sobbed, holding onto me for dear life.

I looked at Gisel, who just shrugged.

"Well," I said, after a minute or two thinking. "We can wait here and hope to be rescued, or I have an idea, but it's not without its risks."

"I don't see we have any real choice," Gisel said, once I had explained my plan. "Waiting is just as risky. Who knows when they will come and try to lay eggs in us. And we don't know how long these two have left." She nodded at the two unconscious children. "Besides, I want to do something."

I nodded. "I thought you would say something like that," I muttered. "Can't disagree though. Very well then, let's prepare."

Do or die time.

~*~

"Ready?" I asked.

Everyone nodded, and moved off, to wait slightly closer to the spider room. I, for my part, took a deep breath and trotted off towards the giant's lair.

"*Shit shit shit shit*," I muttered to myself. I was seriously quite terrified.

Still, there was nothing for it, but to do what I had to do. I kept going until I was next to the doorway. From inside I could hear the giant, still muttering to itself.

With one final intake of breath, I stepped forward, into the giant's view.

"Hello there handsome," I said. "How's your day going?"

The giant simply stared at me for a second, and then grinned, the most horrible grin I had ever seen.

"*Food!*" it boomed, struggling to its feet.

I guess I was the local equivalent of home delivery.

"You want me, you have to catch me fatso!" I said, sticking my tongue out at it.

"Food food food!" Fatso reached out at me, lumbering forward horrifically quickly.

I put all my training to good use, and ran like a bat out of hell up the passageway, my light overhead so I could see where I was going. Tripping and falling now would be the last thing I ever did.

"Food food *fooooood!*" screamed the giant, his shout echoing off the walls. I was going to have nightmares about this, I could tell.

If I survived.

I glanced back and was horrified to see how close it already was. Time to put part B of the plan into action.

I cast a spark spell over my shoulder, aiming at the monster's head. It missed. Cursing, and only moments away from being dinner, I threw half a dozen more. This time some struck their targets. Two hit the beard, and one the hair, both of which erupted into flame.

"*Arrggaggrg!*" the giant cried out, slapping at his own head. "Owowowow!"

Despite the flames now engulfing him, the beast kept on coming. However, he was a lot slower, as he batted at himself in an effort to extinguish the fire that was raging through his hair, allowing me

to increase the distance between us.

And now Gisela and the others came into view, waiting along the corridor wall for me.

“Run!” I screamed. “Go go!”

They started to move as I approached. I grabbed Emma and threw her onto my back as I went by, she wouldn’t be fast enough on her own, and once again sent a quick prayer of thanks to Midex for my increased strength.

Our disturbance had alerted the spiders, which was expected. Now it was time for stage three, or C, or whatever, of the plan.

We burst into the huge room at full speed. I showered the area with fireballs, as a distraction really, and to sow some chaos, but my main concentration was ahead, where I aimed powerful wind blasts, not designed to kill, but to simply blow the spiders out of our path.

We were nearly a third of the way into the room, and making good headway, when the giant burst in behind us, his head now a smouldering hairless mess trailing smoke, adding to the chaos.

Seeing the occupants, the monster roared and laid into the one nearest to him, tossing it across the room into, I was happy to see, one of the green spiders.

Turning to the new threat, the spiders concentrated on the giant, and with my wind and fireballs blowing aside the ones ahead, we, amazingly, managed to reach the far door unscathed.

This was where the plan had to end. There was no way of knowing what was behind the door, but judging from how little it was ajar, I guessed the spiders had been using the hole in the ceiling to get in and out. Of course, that didn’t mean there wasn’t going to be another room full of them beyond it, but we didn’t have any real choice but to risk it.

Our luck held, beyond the doors was another fairly large, but not as large as the last, room. We burst into it and Gisela and I slammed the doors behind us. Whilst they weren’t locked, hopefully that wouldn’t matter, as spiders weren’t famous for their handle manipulation abilities.

I slide Emma off my back, panting hard.

“Remind me not to do that again,” I said.

“Look, stairs, going up.” Gisela pointed. She didn’t even appear to be out of breath.

Indeed there were. A wide staircase opposite led to a set of sturdy, closed double doors.

“Let’s hope they lead out,” I said.

We walked warily towards them. This room seemed to be made of a better class of stone block entirely. They seemed to be giving off a low, golden illumination, which bathed the area in warm light.

We were halfway to our target when there was a shimmer in the air, and a figure materialised.

Ah, so invisibility was possible, was my first thought. Or maybe teleportation.

Shit, was my second thought.

The being ahead of us was nothing like the monsters behind. He was tall, I’d go so far as to say handsome even, with black hair tied back in a ponytail. His slim frame was clad in a white top and matching breeches, with knee high, dark boots, and a deep blue cloak.

See, cloaks! They are so cool.

Apart from his eyes, which were a shocking white, with pinpricks of red in the centre, his face had a chiselled, well-formed human appearance, with skin of a midnight black, and the pointed ears of an elf.

"So, you've escaped my little menagerie have you?" he asked, in smooth tones.

"Who are you?" I asked. "*What* are you?"

"He's a dark elf," Gisel hissed.

"Nearly correct goblin child," he said. "I am half dark elf, half... something else. The name is Isakar." He gave a slight bow.

"Let us pass please," I said.

"How well-mannered of you," he responded. "Unfortunately, I must ask you to return to your room. My pets need you for their nursery. It's nothing personal you understand."

"It's pretty personal for us," I said.

"Touche. In any case, you will do as I say."

"I think not." I conjured a fireball, letting it hover over my upturned palm, in an implied threat.

"Oh, you humans and your little spells." He laughed.

Not the reaction I was hoping for. Still, I didn't just wish to throw a spell at him unprovoked, it didn't seem right somehow. My hesitation nearly cost us all.

With no warning at all he lobbed a ball of dark magical energy at me.

Only my enhanced reflexes, and recent training, saved me. I blasted myself to one side with my wind jets, and cast my fireball back at him.

Isakar simply batted it away. It crashed into the wall, where it exploded.

Oh, that wasn't good.

"Nice try lad, but you're going to have to do a lot better than that. Oh, you too!" This last was directed at Gisel, who had thrown three knives in quick succession. He had dodged two of them, one aimed at his head, the other lower down, and *caught* the third!

We are in trouble here, I thought. Still, if I was going to go down, I was going to go down fighting.

I let loose. "*Fire Bullets!*" I screamed, casting a dozen or so of my mini-fireballs in rapid succession, at full power. Simultaneously, Gisel threw several more blades.

At least this time we made him work a little bit. He held his hands out in front of him, shouting out a short command. My fireballs veered away, exploding around the room. Gisel's daggers simply dropped to the floor.

I kept up the attack, casting my Wind Blade spell at him, for variety. He was ready though, and simply jumped to one side, dodging them. And in return, I was attacked by some kind of ice storm.

Now it was my turn to dodge, as razor sharp shards of ice ripped through the air around me. One sliced my lower leg, drawing blood, and another embedded itself into my thigh, which, let me tell you, hurt a shit load.

"*Fucker!*" I screamed. From a kneeling position, I loosed a fusillade of Fire Bullets and Wind Blades back at him, casting both spells at the same time.

A wind blade caught him in his side, causing a bright gash of red to show against the white of the fabric, but he managed to avoid, or somehow deflect the rest. If I survived this, I'll have to learn how to do that, I thought.

Gisel had used my distraction to manoeuvre round to his rear, despite the risk of getting caught in the crossfire, and used a short lull to leap at him, both daggers in outstretched.

As fast as she was, she wasn't fast enough. Isakar turned and, with an amazing show of dexterity,

kicked her in the side.

"Oof!" I heard her groan, as she was knocked halfway across the room, sliding along the floor and into the wall, where she lay still.

"Gisel!" I cried, and once more threw all I had at the man. This time, despite our relatively close proximity, I used Fire Storm, blasting away at the enemy until he was engulfed by a cloud of smoke and dust.

It went quiet, and I ceased my attack, slowly standing back up. Had I got him?

The smoke eventually cleared, and my heart sank. Isakar was standing in the middle of a small, glowing crater, grinning like a maniac, apparently almost untouched, although his top was slightly smudged, I was glad to see. With that and the blood from my earlier attack, he'd have to have it cleaned.

"That was really well done," he said, calmly. "However, playtime must come to an end." He raised his hand and I was picked up by some unseen force and blasted across the room, to crash into the wall with a bone jarring crunch.

My breath came in gasps now, as I slid to the floor. Something inside of me had broken, and I wheezed, trying not to black out in pain.

Slow footsteps approached, and I made an effort to stand, to cast a spell, but my body wasn't having any of it. I did manage to look up though, at those white eyes, staring down at me.

"As much as my pets need food for their eggs, I think you're too much trouble to keep around. It's a shame, you were the best opponent I've had in a long time. If you were older, more experienced, this could have gone another way. Never mind."

He raised a hand, and a dark glow formed around it.

Ah well, maybe Midex would give me another shot. I doubted it though.

"Goodbye," Isakar said.

Saved.

There was a noise. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and waited for the end.

It didn't come.

Opening my eyes again, I looked up at Isakar. He was staring down, with an expression of immense surprise on his face.

A red stain was slowly spreading out from his middle, ruining that nice white tunic for good.

"Wha..." he started to say. Slowly, without finishing his word, he toppled over backwards, to land with a dull thud on the floor.

"*Theo!*" Through my dimming sight, I saw the heavenly vision of Lissa running towards me.

"Mother..." I groaned, and passed out.

~*~

I woke up in a strange room, in a strange bed.

Made it out alive then, I thought, raising my arm, and looking at my hand. It seemed to be unharmed. Feeling the rest of my body, that appeared to be perfectly fine as well. No doubt I had been healed. Magic was a wonderful thing.

I sat up and took in my surroundings.

The room was a fairly plain affair, with undecorated wooden walls and floor. There was a door set near the corner, and a window behind me, through which I could only see the sky from this angle.

Next to the basic bed was a table with a jug on it, and next to that was a chair, where Lissa was sitting, slightly slumped over, asleep.

I smiled. My bet was that for however long I had been out for, she had not left my side. Such is the nature of mothers.

Climbing out of the bed, and noting I was wearing some kind of long nightgown, I padded over to her and put my hand on her leg.

She instantly jerked awake and, seeing me, drew me up into a bone crushing hug.

"Theo!" she cried. "Thank the Goddess!"

"Urg," was about all I had to say, as the breath was being squeezed out of me.

Eventually she released me, and, after peppering me with kisses, brought me up to date. Apparently she had already heard the tales of my brave exploits from Gisel, who hadn't been seriously hurt, and Toby and Emma, both who had been unscathed in the last battle. The other two children would also be fine, after some work from Lissa and the local healer, I was glad to hear.

Apparently, after we had been snatched, Lissa and Rath had been forced to withdraw. They hadn't given up of course, but simply sorted themselves out and came back in again, more quietly this time. Even so, they had had to fight a whole army of spiders before reaching the newly surfaced dungeon entrance.

Once inside, and through more monsters, mostly spiders again, they had broken through the double doors, just in time to see me nearly killed. Lissa had fired some sort of extremely potent death magic at Isakar, no doubt fuelled by panic and rage, which had put him down for good, I was not unhappy to hear.

After that they had done a bit of healing, enough to move me safely, and carried me back out. There was barely any resistance on the return journey, possibly because of the number of spiders already killed, or maybe because Isakar's influence had gone. In any case, they hadn't had any real problems.

"We've sent a message to the Adventurer's Guild about the new dungeon," Rath finished up. She had come in shortly after I had woken, and subjected me to more hugs and kisses. Such a hard life I had.

"The Adventurer's Guild?"

"It's an organisation that deals with these things," she explained. "They recruit adventurers, who go in and cull the monster population. There's an outpost near most dungeons, otherwise the monsters tend to find their way out into the surrounding countryside and cause problems. I suspect you will become a member when you are older. Both your mother and I have been for many years."

"Oh." There were a lot of things I still didn't know apparently, both about the world, and my mothers.

"They will send people to investigate, maybe set up an outpost here even, depending on how large the dungeon turns out to be," Lissa said.

"And so, that's us all caught up." Rath finished. "How are you feeling? This little side-trip has put us behind schedule."

"I'm fine," I replied, stretching. "Although, I would like my own clothes back please."

Lissa giggled. "They've been washed and mended," she said. "I'll bring them in."
"And... some food?" I looked up and batted my eyelids, in puppy dog fashion.
Laughing, both my mothers stood up.
"He's fully recovered," Rath said.
"A dungeon adventurer before he's even six," Lissa added. "Truly remarkable Theodore."
"I try my best," I sniffed.
Modest as fuck, that's me.

Epilogue - Infiltrator.

I stepped down from the wagon and looked around. The academy was plainly visible, a large square monster of a building squatting on the top of the high ground.

Moving out of the way, so the rest of the passengers could disembark, I collected my small bag of belongings from the coach driver, and began the last leg of my journey on foot, towards my destination.

It had taken quite some time to get here. Glancing at the residents from under my hood as I walked along just reinforced how far away I was from my homeland. Not that they would see anything strange looking at me. Disguise was a basic skill I had long ago mastered.

I'm what some call an Infiltrator, although the few who know of us tend to call us different things. Spy, assassin, saboteur, in truth those are all also correct, as our skills encompass all of those things. We are not large in number, as not many survive the brutal training regimen, which starts from an extremely young age. It is carried out in utter secrecy, within the hidden and vast headquarters of our organisation.

Out of my class of thirty, four had graduated. Apparently that was about average. The ones who hadn't made it... *hadn't made it*.

I had finished top of my class. My personal tutor had informed me my scores were amongst the highest on record. Then she had brutally punched me in the stomach and told me not to get cocky about it. I was still a young brat.

One day I would go back and kill her for that.

Back to now.

This was my first major mission, and it had been stressed that it would test even my skills to the limit. As usual, I had no idea of who had employed me; that went through my guild master, and I wasn't even sure *she* knew the identity of the one who had placed the contract.

Mine was a world of secrets, shadows, deceit and death.

This world I was entering though, was a bustling one, full of students of all ages, bright eyed and bursting with enthusiasm. I would really have to work to fit in here.

Gritting my teeth, I walked over the drawbridge, into the academy.

Despite what I had been told, I didn't expect to be here very long. I mean, even if I had to make it look like an accident, how hard would it be to kill a five year old boy?

Chuckling to myself, I entered the massive structure, and merged in with the crowd of students.

This was going to be *fun*.

~ End of Book 1 ~

Next: Book 2: *Academy*



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