

Chapter 4 Trouble at Home

As soon as *Albatross IX* opened its doors, Eric ran out. The airship hub was crowded with people of all shapes and sizes and he laughed at the sight of it.

As the capital city of a major nation, it was truly cosmopolitan. He saw beast folk and cows and birds and fellow humans and even an elf or two. There was one more at his destination and thinking of her inspired him further. He jumped above the crowd and cast Air Disk to walk over their heads.

Someone in the crowd took a picture.

“The Trickster's Choice has returned...”

At the exit, Eric dropped the spell and dashed out into Sailor Town. The streets were cold but not as bad as Mambi's and not yet icy. Therefore, he felt no fear in reciting Winged Feet to grant himself super speed. He dodged carts, sapients, and early snow drifts on his way to Scholar Town. Telescope Bridge was blocked by a field trip, so he bypassed it and jumped clear over the river. One of the students took a picture of him and shared it with all her online friends.

Now inside Scholar Town, memories of his friends rushed to the front of his mind: studying in this park, taking a break at that cafe, doing research at that library. At this speed, he was one minute away from reuniting with them and doing it all again.

“I love super-speed!”

He increased the mana feed to the spell and pushed himself faster. He trashed the remaining blocks with his slipstream. A third person took a look at the overturned trashcans, scattered litter, ruined advertisements, and started a blog post on his scry.

“*Repercussions of Living near the Trickster's Choice.*”

It wasn't until Eric was yards away from the school that he realized he was running too fast to stop. Immediately, he canceled the spell and composed a contrary earth one as a super-break. By the time he came to a full stop, he'd dug a ditch through the middle of the last block.

“Oops...”

He cast Dark Veil before anyone saw him and ran out of the ditch. Just as he entered the school courtyard, his conscience struck. *Annala would figure out that it was me. It won't take long.*

“Ease my load and mend the road. Return to your previous mode: Earth Laborer!”

Brown light illuminated his staff and connected to the dirt piled up by his break. Clump by clump, it moved back into place. Mechanically, it was no different from levitation and that was covered in the first section of *Introduction to Magecraft*. Since he was currently invisible due to the Dark Veil, an outsider would see the dirt moving on its own. This was also quickly on the Internet.

Finally...I wonder what class they're in?

The bell rang and students filled the hallway. Among them was a girl with pointed ears, a boy with a cat tail, and a five-foot lizard walking on his hind legs. Unnoticed by all, Eric approached the girl. He snuck up on her, slipped an arm around her waist, and a hand over her eyes. The girl

spun around and kneed him in the groin. The Dark Veil dissipated and he fell to his knees, clutching himself, and making funny noises.

“Eric!?” After a moment, she tackle-hugged him. “Oh, Trickster! Eric, I'm so sorry!” She helped him up and hugged him again. “Where have you been? It's been four months and first thing I did is kick you in the...”

She pulled back and scowled. “You shouldn't have snuck up on me! It's not funny!” Her expression softened a second time and she resumed their close embrace. “I'm glad you're back.”

The lizard and cat joined from the sides in a flanking hug. Their tails curled around the entire group. Elf Annala, cat-demon Revas, and lizard-demon Oito were the first friends he'd had since his elder brother.

“I take it you missed me,” Eric said.

“Of course I-we did!” Annala replied.

“But Annala more than either of us,” Revas cut in.

“Yesss, you shhould have ssseen her mope,” Oito added.

“You guys were upset too!” Annala said angrily, cheeks flushed.

It was louder than she meant, and now everyone was staring at her. If that weren't bad enough, she still had her arms around Eric's neck. Her friends had already let go and were smiling. Annala turned a brighter shade of red and retracted her arms. She tried to back away, but the tails were still entwined and holding her against Eric. Pulling on her ear, she continued, “He's an old friend...and he was missing...and...”

Someone said Eric looked familiar and another agreed that he was in the pictures he saw on *Carrier Pidgeon*. Soon there was chatter about the Trickster's Choice and the vessel of the Greater Mage/Sage Dengel.

Dengel was a mage that had lived two thousand years ago, before Ataidar's founding. He created the first comprehensive system of magic that anyone could learn. Without him, magic would never have become as commonplace as it was today. Four months ago, he possessed “That sellstaff” and walked among them. Despite the poor quality of his host, he reached the final round of the New Scepter Competition. When Duke Selen Esrah tried to usurp Ataidar's throne, it was Dengel's power that paved the path of victory for their princess. Then, he mysteriously disappeared, followed by his vessel. Why was he here now? Did he still bear the spirit of Dengel?

Eric's fists clenched. *That's not how it happened!*

He had earned the right to possess Dengel and use his knowledge for his own gain. It was his idea to compete in the New Scepter Competition, and while Dengel *did* help a lot, Eric won all the bouts in the tournament by himself! When Selen launched his cup, Dengel took his side at the first sign of trouble. He almost guaranteed Selen's victory. It was only because Eric exploited his pride in a mental duel and led him into a trap, that Kasile triumphed. It was one of his proudest moments, yet all he heard was talk of Dengel's vessel.

“Yeah, that's me, but I was Dengel's *landlord*. Anyone want my autograph?”

“Why?” asked a dog boy. “You're nobody special. You were just *carrying* someone that was.”

“I think he's special.”

A human boy walked out of the crowd. He had silver hair and the crest of House Darwoss sewn into his shirt. Norej Darwoss looked smugly at the four friends.

“I'd rather kill myself than have a *crazy dagger-ears* in my mind. I applaud his self-restraint.”

Revas would have shredded him if Oito hadn't held him back. Eric was more pensive.

“Change ‘crazy’ to ‘arrogant,’ and you have him nailed.”

Both Annala (still in Eric's grasp) and Norej (who noticed their intimacy) looked at him in surprise. Then they simultaneously agreed.

“Arrogant *is* a better adjective.”

“Indeed, Dengel was a despicably proud creature,” Annala said.

“Really?” Norej appeared genuinely interested. “My father said he was a power-hungry backstabber who provided our ancestors with pilfered elfin technology.”

Annala nodded. “Absolutely.” She unwound the tails. “I could give you the List of Infamy if you're interested.”

“I am. My father's paper would love it.”

She eased her way out of Eric's embrace to stand closer to Norej. “If that's true, you could also increase human awareness of the Feast of the Fallen One.”

“An anti-elf holiday celebrated *by* elves – fascinating!”

Oito and Revas looked to each for confirmation of the astonishing sight. Eric himself felt jealous and outraged. His arrival thunder had been stolen by Dengel! Even if it was about hatred of him, it still angered him.

“Mr. Watley,” Norej said, “I'd like to discuss a job with you.”

“What do you have in mind?” Eric asked sourly.

His mercenary nature forbid him from turning down a job without hearing it out first. The three of them talked on the way to history class and it brightened Eric's mood considerably. They settled on a deal before they reached the door. Inside, the teacher was lecturing on the era Dengel lived in.

This one in particular was about Dengel's role in the War of Taeh's Vengeance. It might as well have been a sleep spell because half the class was drowsy. By the second half of the lecture, Revas was curled up in his seat with his tail swishing peacefully and Oito slept upright with his tongue slithering in and out. Only Norej and Annala remained attentive.

“...was contracted by the second half brother's cousin of the region's headman for a means in which to conduct the Siege of Lluspha,” the teacher droned. “The Founder of Magic then replied—”

“Bow down to my superior greatness!”

A sphere of darkness hit the center of the room and burst into all-consuming blackness. Instantly, the light in the room died and a gust of wind blew out of nowhere. It scattered papers, threw pencils, and tossed hair.

“I who controls the night itself, I who created magic, I who have an ego the size of a mountain! Dengel Tymh!”

A ball of mana flashed into being above the teacher's desk. Its glow slowly grew until the students could see someone molding it in his hands.

“Nature's beauty, I call...” The person clapped his hands together and light shone between the cracks of his fingers. “Now behold! The wonder of it all!” The mage spread his hands and a butterfly of light soared into the class. It made one circuit and alighted on Annala's head. “Looks like my butterfly has found a flower, and a beautiful one at that.” She blushed.

The mage dismissed it all with a theatrical wave of his right hand and light returned to the room. Without the darkness to hide him, everyone saw the figure in a black cloak.

“That was Dengel's *real* life. He's remembered as a Founder of Magic but he earned his living doing special effects for aristocrats.” Eric tore off the cloak to reveal a colorful and pointed hat hidden underneath. “He was one step below Court Jester because he didn't have the privilege of mocking the king. He was a sycophant instead.”

The teacher looked at him. “You must have been the vessel I heard about.”

“*Landlord* and I thought I could add some spice to your lecture so your students will learn something – or stay awake, if nothing else.”

The teacher frowned. “I'm sure you know a lot about Dengel, but you have not been hired to teach this class.”

“Actually, I have. A generous student thought the class would benefit from a primary source.” He made a grand gesture with his arms and shouted, “Look at the teacher if you would like to see me act out Lluspha!”

The students, who had been awakened by Eric's entrance, looked to the teacher for an explanation. “It's unanimous then.” Eric looked over his shoulder at the teacher and shrugged. “Sorry, chief. The tribe has spoken.”

“Wait a –”

“From the memories of a magic villain.” Eric swung his staff in a circle. “Reveal the story and make it thrillin’!”

A trail of mana streamed out of his staff and concentrated in a sphere of light. The sphere grew into a screen big enough for all to see. Inside was the viewpoint of someone standing on a hill overlooking a valley. To their right and left were soldiers and directly ahead was a fortified town.

“This is the Siege of Lluspha as Dengel told me, every day, for a whole month.”

Within the sphere, a pair of hands and arms whirled about in mysterious patterns and a voice called out words in a language no one recognized.

“That's gibberish, in case you were wondering. Dengel said his clients were impressed by his ‘magical language.’”

Dengel traced a circle around the town, said a word with an air of finality, and a fifty-foot chunk of rock arose out of the ground, snapping tree roots and grinding stone. Within minutes, the town of Lluspha was a prison. Dengel's company were the guards, and his patron the warden. The sphere zoomed in on the rock walls and displayed the companies drawing bows and notching arrows. They fired on anyone that left the cover of buildings. Dengel chuckled.

“The siege lasted for about a week,” Eric continued. “Dengel said they had enough food to last longer, but, and I quote, ‘they were so afraid of my magical might that they threw themselves at my mercy,’ which I assume means they couldn't stand the snipers hovering over them.”

The sphere fast-forwarded to a formal surrender, including enslavement for the losers and a feast for the winners. Dengel did not partake in the latter until he performed flashy magician-style magic for his patron. Finally, the town was garrisoned and Dengel moved on. The final scene was Dengel riding next to a big man wearing the skeletons of monsters.

The sphere faded.

The class whispered among themselves. The teacher looked abashed and unsure of what to do. Eric leaned back smugly. Dengel loved hearing the sound of his own voice; sometimes, Eric couldn't fall asleep at night because of the dead mage's monologue. *Payback's a trickster, isn't it, Dengel?*

All you've done is impress my glory upon them.

Eric grit his teeth and pretended he didn't hear that.

"Mr. Watley," the teacher said, "historical records state that Dengel was a hardworking individual who braved countless dangers to perfect the art we that we rely on today."

The teacher picked up a book and paged through it. When he found what he was looking for, he showed it to Eric. It was a picture of Dengel in a study. All around him were stacks of books and in front of him was ink, quill, and paper. His face was dignified, his hair brilliant, and his robes magnificent.

It made Eric's stomach turn and a shadow of Dengel appeared next to him. This Dengel's golden hair was dull, the hook of his nose was exaggerated, and the rest of his face pockmarked. His elegant rune-covered robe was replaced by a black funeral shroud. He leaned over Eric's shoulders and whispered in his ear, *Listen to your elder, boy. You know the truth of his words better than anyone.*

"I had that guy *in my head* for a whole month! I know him better than *any* historian."

The teacher opened his mouth when Annala raised her hand and stood up.

"In my home village, we have a festival dedicated to Dengel." Before the teacher could say anything, she continued, "*The Feast of the Fallen One*. We deface his statue, burn effigies, and recite his *many* atrocities. It will be available in the *Darwoss Herald* if anyone is interested."

Shadow Dengel floated to her chair and tried to grab her hair, but his translucent hand passed through. *It should be "Feast of the Favored One," you smug, ugly, know-it-all slu-*

Eric grabbed his hair and tossed him into the ground. No one else could see him, so they assumed he was tussling with Tasio, thus leading to more rumors. The teacher dismissed the sight and continued the debate.

"Yes, Ms. Enaz, we know how disappointed your race is that he shared magecraft with 'lower life forms.' Our textbook is interested only in an impartial view."

Annala looked affronted and sat down with her arms crossed.

"So when does the textbook get that impartial view!?" Revas asked. He was already on his feet. "All I saw was constant praise of him!" Oito put a claw on his shoulder.

"I beliefff what my friend isssss trying to sssay issss that the texsss doesssn't talk of Dengel persssoonally. Only an account of hissss actionsss on the world sssstage."

To settle the matter of whose presentation was more effective, Eric suggested a pop quiz. The

teacher quickly put one together and scored them ten minutes later. No one could remember a thing about the lecture, but everyone scored high on the presentation.

“You're welcome,” Eric said with an obnoxious smile, but to his surprise, the teacher didn't look upset or angry. In fact, he looked *bemused*.

“No wonder you're the Trickster's Choice. Class dismissed.”

The teacher left without saying another word, and the bulk of the class followed him out. Eric's trio of friends stayed behind along with one other. Without leaving his seat, Norej slow-clapped. It was hard to tell if he was pleased with Eric for his performance or himself for thinking of it. Step by step, he descended to join them. He stopped in front of Eric and offered his hand.

“Well done, Trickster's Choice.”

Eric shook it. “Thank you. My pay?”

Norej brought out a sack and placed a few coins in Eric's waiting hand. “Money well spent.”

For the second time that day, Oito and Revas were stunned. “This was your idea?”

He looked at them with disdain. “Is there something wrong with your eyes? Didn't you see me pay the mercenary?”

Revas' claws extended.

“Assskk a sstupid qessstion. We get it. Do you do thisssss offften?”

“I have the experience to put both of you to shame. You never realized that *I* was the one behind the bubble bum plot.”

All three friends gasped. Then Revas retorted with, “You never realized that *we* were behind the chicken and the egg plot.”

“How about you pool your resources?” Eric put in. “Together, you could terrorize the school.”

“I'd rather not work with dumb animals.” The cat and lizard imitated a chicken and bawked. Norej's eyes narrowed. “Meet me in the chemistry lab. We'll talk.”

He marched out, his head high and shoulders back. Oito and Revas pulled down their eyelids and stuck out their tongues at his back. Annala rolled her eyes and pushed them out the door.

“Go. You might become friends from this.”

“Imposssible!”

“Yeah, and besides, you need us to walk you home.”

“I'll be fine. I have my bow and my Eric. I mean, my friend Eric.”

The faces of the beastfolk simultaneously shifted into sly grins.

“Stop that! Go to the chem lab and plan your pranks.”

“If you want to be alone with him that badly...”

“*Go!* Or I'll recite the Periodic Table of Elements, including all protons, neutrons, and electrons!”

They ran away. Annala turned shyly to Eric and squeezed her hands together behind her back.

“Sorry about that. Good friends can be annoying.”

“It's no problem, but what were they talking about? Do you need to carry something heavy?”

“Oh, if only it was that simple.” She tugged her pointed ear. “You see, lately, an older man has taken an inappropriate interest in me.”

“Really!? Did you report him to the Justice Station?”

“Those assholes said she had to do it herself!”

Revas stood in the doorway in a fine fury. Oito stood behind, looking annoyed.

“I’m starting with hydrogen!”

“You can go all the way to Whateverogen and it won’t stop me from calling those lazy, tax-sucking idiots assholes.”

Oito yanked Revas’ cat ear. “Calm yourssself.” To Eric, he said, “They can’t do anysssing until Nulssso commitssss a crime. Right now, he barely countssss ass a ssstalker.”

“He tried to put a collared leash on her neck! That’s not a crime!?”

Images of the elves walking off the slave ship flashed in Eric’s mind.

“*Tell me what happened.*”

Annala continued tugging on one ear and said, “I’ve noticed him following me on my way to and from school for a while now. It was shortly after Daughter of Fire Kasile announced at her coronation that plans for the Mana Mutation Summit to be hosted in Ataidar and take place at the Royal Palace would proceed as scheduled. Sometimes, he stays hidden but sometimes, he comes out and talks with me. He said his name is Nulso Xialin and that he runs a media company in Scholar Town. He’s offered me free photographs, an internship, claimed to be an old research partner of my mother, and asked me about you.”

“That guy is full of it!” Revas spat. “One time, he had the gall to say he could restore her shapeshifting ability!”

“You can’t shapeshift?”

“*Not important!*” Annala said. “A-an-anyway, he always carries an ordercraft subjugation collar with him and he usually addresses his words to my neck.”

The elfin slaves flashed again in his mind and, this time, they were accompanied by the punk that enslaved them. He had an impenetrable barrier that stopped his staff thrust cold and could negate his spells with a gesture. Internally shaking his head, he stated proudly, “If he’s an ordercrafter, I think I can handle him. I defeated one on my way here.”

A swift change of mode came over Annala and she stared at Eric with new respect. He hadn’t seen such admiration in her eyes since he killed Tahart in her defense.

“Really?! You can defeat – of course you can. Silly me! You’re the Trickster’s Choice! It stands to reason that you’d be able to kill minions of Order!”

As much as he enjoyed it, her gushing caused him greater guilt. When she pulled out her scry, saying she had to call someone and tell them about his accomplishment, he blurted out, “An orc helped!”

She paused.

“There was an orc who dismissed his order shield. I defeated him after that.”

Annala’s excitement dimmed so quickly and so far that Eric felt like trash. She put her scry away like she’d lost faith in him. Her disappointment could be read in every move of her body.

“As I was saying…”

Eric’s heart twisted at her tone.

“Humans cannot defeat ordercrafters because only Chaos itself can defeat them. Thus, I am theoretically better equipped to subdue Mr. Xialin than any member of Roalt’s Finest. They would have to produce chaotic weapons themselves, which no human has ever done outside of legends, or special order them from an elf village. This second option would be the more impressive of the two, considering the expense of the production of such weapons and the extensive red tape in both human and elf governments to prevent them falling into hands that would misuse them, or simply use them at all. My mom is working on resolving these two problems because she believes elves need to get out more so humans won’t think my dad is a typical elf, which is why she suggested study abroad and...”

She stopped and hugged herself.

“I’m rambling, sorry.”

“Don’t be. Although I might not be able to defeat him, I’m confident in my ability to escape him under cover of darkness.”

Without a word, he vanished beneath a Dark Veil.

“I guess that would be useful for evasion, unless he used Interdict to prohibit such casting, but I doubt he has the power or authority to do that on his own. In any case, it would be a useful set-up.”

She reached into a pocket and pulled out a charm shaped like a quiver. She said the words “heavenly change” and it became a full-sized quiver filled with arrows. She pulled out a second charm shaped like a bow. She said the words “heavenly change” and it transformed into a full-sized longbow. It was gleaming white from end to end, with golden runes engraved on its surface and wrapped along its length.

“This is a Death Killer bow. It works as a function of channeled life energy infused with chaotic energy; the first is in opposition to death anti-energy and the second is the primordial energy of which the universe is made and can be destroyed. The filigree work as compressors for the instant rune algorithms that control the energy flow when the string is pulled. Said algorithms are braced by information slots that can be filled and cleared as needed based on the enemy involved and, in doing so, bypass a number of defenses that could otherwise allow the target to negate the arrow’s force or otherwise hinder its trajectory. I created it to destroy reapers and so it should prove effective against a mere divinely enhanced human.”

“Eric, translate!” Revas demanded. “She’s explained five times and I still don’t get it.”

“It uses special energy to attack its weak point.”

“Ooohhhh...”

Annala wrinkled her nose. “‘Special energy’ is a gross over-simplification but correct.” She cleared her throat. “Revas, Oito, as you can see, I have this situation under control, so you can go to the chem lab. I bet Norej has set a welcome prank for you by now.”

“That two-faced jerk! I’ll get him for that!”

Revas ran out the door with Oito quickly following.

Annala giggled. “Shall we go?”

Eric placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. “Rest assured, Lady Annala. This

mercenary will escort you safely home.”

She giggled again. “I’ll withhold your pay if you don’t.”

They left the school side by side and mingled with the other couples. The fact that they were together was a bigger topic of discussion than the fact that they had weapons out. Eric kept his staff ready and Annala kept her bow in hand.

There was no trouble for several blocks, not even traffic. Crowds parted when they saw The Trickster's Choice guarding a female elf. This picture joined the others on the Internet and a couple Chaosians declared it an omen and threw up their arms in prayer. All the attention made Annala uncomfortable so Eric sought to divert it to himself. Holding his staff high with one hand, he demanded peaches and noble titles for his service in escorting the priestess of Lady Chaos, Golden Cicada! This made Annala smile and she paused her scry conversation to add something.

“For the record,” she said to the crowds, “I am *not* seeking any scriptures on chaotic enlightenment.” Then to the person on the phone, she continued, “That’s your job, Auntie H...”

When they were five blocks away from the school and seven from Annala's apartment, the trouble began. Eric felt it as a wave of intense spiritual power. It made his hair stand on end and opened the pores in his skin. He never felt something this powerful; not from Basilard, a veteran mercenary, and not from Dengel, a legendary elfin mage. He gulped and held his staff in a defensive posture. After two more blocks, they found him. Nulso Xialin stood between them and their destination.

He was a middle-aged human man, but his sickly pale skin made him look undead. He wore his platinum blonde hair in a low ponytail and it draped around his neck like a collar. The irises of his eyes were pure silver grey, and the eyes themselves were sharp and focused on his elfin prey. He stood a good foot taller than she. His clothes looked stiff enough to serve as armor and an old-fashioned camera rested on top of his coat. He was further protected by a bubble of eldritch light encompassing his body and soul. It made Eric’s skin crawl. Annala cowered behind him.

“You can’t hide from me, Golden Hair. Today, I will solve your mana mutation problems.”

“Her only problem is you,” Eric declared.

“Don’t you know? Elfin shapeshifting is a controlled mana mutation and she can’t do it. She hides from this problem like she’s hiding from me.”

Annala stepped out from behind Eric and notched an arrow. It pointed at the ground, not at Nulso. Nevertheless, the bow glowed as it powered up and a magic circle appeared beneath her feet. Eric recognized only a handful of the runes, and they were “bypass defenses,” “empower,” and “kill.”

At once, the street cleared as civilians moved into buildings and off the street. Nearby stores closed and homes locked. All of them knew that a fight between an elf, the Trickster's Choice, and an ordercrafter was bound to be destructive. Others watched from windows and balconies. *They* knew that such a battle was bound to be entertaining. The only business still open was a popcorn vendor.

“Who’s hiding? Leave me in peace!”

Nulso spread his hands in an open gesture. “Your arrow can’t hurt me. Come with me and I

can help you. Otherwise, something bad will happen to your *mortal* friend.”

Annala smirked. “Thank you for threatening him. Ataidar has very good self-defense laws.”

She released the arrow and it pierced Nulso’s bubble like a shroud. It lodged in his chest and discharged its payload of magic power into his body. While he didn’t shout, it was clear he was in great pain from the grimace he made.

“Cute and Intelligent Elf Girl: 1. Lame Order Drone: 0.”

Nulso removed the arrow, reformatted it for Order’s power, and placed it in his pocket.

“You are arrogant and complacent. I don't need Order's power to put you in your place.”

Nulso's spirit pillar grew as high as a building and his spiritual power radiated a full square block. By proximity alone, he made bystanders faint. Eric was forced to lean on his staff. The intensity of his power was unlike anything he’d ever felt. It was more than oppressive; it demanded submission and pushed his head down. Nulso did all this without moving. His first offensive gesture was to withdraw a metal collar attached to a three-foot-long steel cable leash.

“Over my dead body! Those who are empowered by Order the First Born are feeble before Lady Chaos the Matriarch. In her name, bow down!”

Nulso blinked and then laughed. “You have no authority to use those words. You are a pitiful mage if you do not understand that.”

Summoning his own spiritual power, Eric raised his head and unleashed the full force of his Evil Eye. All the pain, suffering, and sorrow he had gathered over his entire life, he flung at Nulso. It was returned ten-fold.

Nulso’s Evil Eye was like being flash frozen from the inside out. The only difference was the absence of eventual numbness. Eric felt only the burning pain of tissue damage. Nulso's spiritual power was all around him; crushing him, squeezing him. Out of his mind with terror, he fainted.

“Foolish child. Your suffering and hatred are nothing compared to mine.”

Opening his mouth, Nulso took a deep breath and blue energy left the body of everyone unconscious. It streamed down his throat. He caught another arrow that bypassed his barrier and held it still while he swallowed the stolen energy. He briefly glowed blue while his hand burned and sizzled with golden-brown smoke.

“Even if my barrier can’t stop the arrows, it can slow them down enough for me to catch them.”

He stepped forward and runes on the collar shone dimly. Annala jumped away from him, grabbed another arrow, and notched it by the time her feet touched the ground. A magic circle appeared beneath her feet, the arrow charged, and she shouted,

“Those touched by chaos will never falter! Their sword shall pierce any shield and their will shall burst all restraints! They shall be free all the days of their lives!”

The arrow flew towards Nulso like an amber missile. It bypassed his barrier and headed straight for his forehead. Then he caught it. Just like the previous arrow, he caught it without difficulty.

“Wh-wha...”

“Just as a mage requires magic theory to support his spells, so is faith needed for prayers.” Between his fingers, he snapped the arrow in two. “Your arrow cannot hurt me, oh ye of little faith.”

“I have *plenty* of faith!” Annala shouted. “Lady Chaos –”
“*Apostate!*”

The word struck her like a physical blow and stole the strength from her legs. She fell backwards, her bow clattering on the ground, and repeated, “I’m not. I’m not.” Over and over again.

“Your scripture doesn’t work against me. Allow a true believer to show you how it’s done.”

He pushed both fists before his chest and closed his eyes. His aura flared and he began to speak. “No soul escapes the All-seeing Eye. No power exists beyond the All-controlling Hand. Resistance is forlorn.”

The aura retracted and fit around him like ghostly armor. He opened his eyes and stared with solid grey eyes.

Adrenaline pumping, Annala fired a fourth arrow. Nulso’s Armor of Stability deflected it and he stepped forward. Annala fired a fifth time and Nulso didn’t break stride as his ethereal armor deflected it. By the sixth arrow, he was close enough to grab her bow. With an effortless yank, he threw it away.

Panting with fear, Annala drew a dagger and stabbed him, but he caught that too. Then he grabbed the wrist holding it. Twisting her arm behind her back, he joined the other hand to it and held them both with one of his own. Annala squirmed and kicked while he drew the first arrow of the battle out of his pocket and twisted it around her wrists like handcuffs.

He whispered in her ear, “Be glad. Your suffering will lead to a cure for mana mutation.”

“My family will save me!”

Nulso placed the collar around her neck. “Your family isn’t here.”

A blue mana bolt exploded against his head, knocking him clear away from Annala and into a building on the other side of the street.

A human woman stepped out of the shadows. She wore a white cloak over a stained darker colored tunic and pants. Her long, pale blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail, thus putting her mad eyes on full display. In one hand, she held a rowan staff that affixed a sapphire at one end and an emerald at the other. Her second hand brought a listening crystal to her mouth.

“Memo to myself. In the future, reserve extensive experiments for when my niece is not being stalked. End memo.”

“Auntie H!” Annala ran into her arms. “You cut it biologically close.”

Hasina smiled and hugged her. “Sorry, my little guinea pig. Pemas insisted that I close up my work before leaving.”

Annala tilted her head. “You were operating on a patient?”

Hasina continued smiling. “Sure, let’s call it that.”

“Well if it isn’t my partner in science, Ginger Hasina!” Nulso bellowed. “I wasn’t expecting you to drop by and interfere.”

“Good afternoon, Harry Butchin,” Hasina said in reply. “My niece called and said you volunteered for my next experiment.”

Nulso looked down at the elf with stern disapproval. Annala scurried behind Hasina.

“Harry Butchin is dead. My name is Nulso Xialin. As for your ‘niece,’ good girls shouldn't tell lies. After I defeat 'Auntie H,' I will make sure she never lies again.”

Hasina pounded her fists. “Now who's lying?”

Nulso expanded his spirit pillar a second time, but Hasina was not affected. As a captain level mage in the Dragon's Lair, she possessed far greater fortitude than a novice like Eric. Unlike Annala, she also possessed a genuinely pious soul. She walked straight up to him and socked him in the gut. He bent over from the impact and then she kned his chin. This made him fall over backward.

“You may work for Order now, but you're still a wimp.”

He stood up and scowled. “You're still a brute. Working for Chaos is why you have more lawsuits than patents.”

Hasina scowled in return. “You abandoned our work and I kept it alive despite the cost.”

Shapes slithered out of Nulso's aura and took the form of miniature people. They put on a show of a crowd chasing someone away from a building. Hasina's jaw tightened while Nulso grinned sadly.

“If you had come with me, then you would see how misguided you are. The true path to curing mana mutation is not *more mana mutation*. Why can't you see reason?”

“It must be the glare coming off your orderly cage.”

Suddenly, Nulso's aura shifted from grey-blue to the eldritch light of his Armor of Stability. It leached color out of the surrounding area and decreased its temperature. Dozens of ethereal claws emerged from it like a spider's war arsenal.

“I will force you to see reason.”

All of them struck at once. Hasina dodged some and deflected others, but eventually, one grabbed her leg and tripped her up. Then another grabbed her left arm and a third her throat and again until she could no longer move. A final appendage, shaped like a human hand, placed itself on Hasina's head and entered her mind. Annala gasped in horror. Nulso grinned in triumph.

A golden-brown beam struck Nulso like a bolt of divine judgment. His tendrils vanished, his armor shattered, his aura dissipated, and he fell to his knees. The light solidified into Tasio the Trickster with his arms crossed.

“You crossed the line, *Harry Butchin*. Now you have three choices: You continue harassing my granddaughter and I kill you. You call reinforcements, I will call reinforcements, and *then* I will kill you. You run away with your tendrils between your legs and I do not kill you.”

Nulso looked past Tasio to Annala. At the moment, she was still bound, but Hasina stood guard next to her. He weighted his chances of grabbing her and running away against a chaotic blade cutting him in half and made his choice.

“Option three.”

“Good boy. Now make your promise.”

“I, Nulso Xialin, A.K.A. Harry Butchin, promise that I shall not harm, coerce, control, etc. the elf known as Annala Enaz for a period of thirty-one days. Every soul within this body or attached to this princeps' soul shall abide by this promise.”

“If I see you bothering Annala on the thirty-second, I will cut you into a hundred pieces and bury them in a hundred places.”

Again, Nulso ignored him for Annala. The look on his face and greed in his eyes made her shiver and squirm in the arrow cuffs.

“Look forward to the thirty-third day, my Golden Hair. Together, we will stop mana mutation once and for all.” Nulso turned his back on them and walked away.

Tasio looked about. The streets and nearby buildings were cracked and dented by Nulso’s aura. Annala’s deflected arrows vaporized parts of both. Every civilian in sight was unconscious and mana-drained. Hasina was in ordercraft shock and Annala was traumatized by the ordercrafter.

He said to himself, “I don’t have much time.”

“Why isn’t he waking up?”

Annala knelt at Eric’s side. She desperately pulled on the arrow cuffs so she could do more than cry over him, but Nulso had wound them too tight. She grunted and looked for her dagger. Having found it, she sat in front of it and sawed through the arrow. To make sure she didn’t cut herself, she looked over her shoulder.

Tasio floated over Eric and slapped his face twice. Then he hovered his butt over Eric and farted. Neither action awoke him.

“My guess is Evil Eye trauma. He certainly has more fuel behind it than Eric and his soul is stronger too. It’s no surprise.”

“Why didn’t you stop him earlier!?” Annala demanded. “You could have prevented all this damage, to him and the street, and I...I was almost collared because you waited until the last second!”

Tasio held up his hands. “That’s how Chaos works. You knows this better than anyone in this city; in fact, I believe you gave a verbal report about it a month ago.”

She glared up at him while continuing to saw.

“Perhaps Nulso had a point about your lack of faith.”

He disappeared and Annala tried to forget what he said. She came to a conclusion that accommodated the events without forcing her to acknowledge she didn’t want to.

The arrow finally gave way and she pulled her arms apart. She put the dagger back in its holster and rubbed her naked neck. The feeling of the collar lingered. Although Nulso had failed in the end, she knew Eric would blame himself for not stopping him.

“Auntie H, can you fix him?”

Hasina’s eyes lit up with glee. “I’ll try something experimental!”

She opened up her satchel and pulled out a number of bags. Most of them had mundane smelling salts, but one had squirming and shining things. She picked one at a time and drifted them over his body, but none of them worked. Then she reached for the final bag and –

“Captain!”

Hasina deflated. “Oh, pooy...”

Dragon’s Lair Lieutenant Jemas stood behind her, tapping his left foot. Plastering a smile on her face, she stood up and greeted him. He held out his hand and she grudgingly handed over the

bag.

“Louson Fly larvae cause horrific hallucinations. You know this.”

“A trial conducted by the FHD proved they could cure certain comas. You know this.”

Jemas withdrew a device. “Quadra Resuscitator; tried, proven, accepted, established –”

“Boring!”

“Do I have to tell Guildhead Ridley?”

Hasina snatched the device and passed it to Annala. “I take it you know how this works?”

Annala tugged her ear. “He's not my boyfriend...”

“Phileo works just as well as Eros.”

Bashfully, Annala accepted the device and administered the treatment. Mana and love traveled through the device and mended Eric's mind/spirit. He woke up and Annala quickly hid the device.

“What happened? No collar...where's Nulso!?”

“Auntie H came to my rescue and then Tasio came to hers. He made Nulso promise to leave me alone for a month.”

“Why didn't he just kill him?”

Annala took a deep breath.

“Nulso Xialin used to be known as Harry Butchin. He was a Greater Mage healer that pioneered research in the field of Medical Mana Mutation and worked with my mother and Hasina in a clinic called 'The Organic Research Repository.' His testing and initial patients were a success, but then they developed the monster mentality known as monsanity in the event now called 'The Butchin Tragedy.' The clinic closed, stuff happened, and he's now an ordercrafter working in the same field. If Tasio killed him, even if it was in defense of someone, then those sympathetic to Order and/or antagonistic to Chaos would spin it into unfortunate implications and sabotage efforts at renewing Medical Mana Mutation at the Upcoming Mana Mutation Summit.”

Eric took a moment to process this.

“So he doesn't remove the threat to you because he's a slave to PR.”

Annala shook her head. “Again, you oversimplify and, this time, you let your bias cloud your judgment. It's not about The Trickster's ego, but wide-spanning political/religious/medical issues.”

“Otherworlder –”

Eric suddenly noticed that Hasina stood over him and immediately crab-walked five feet away.

“I don't suppose you'd be willing to show your gratitude to a fellow mercenary?”

“You used up all my gratitude when you experimented on me while I was unconscious.”

“Why do you think I did such a thing?”

“You were within five feet of me.”

“*Touché*. Jemas, let's get back to work!”

Jemas sighed and said, “Yes, captain.”

The two elder mercenaries went on their way and the kids continued to Annala's apartment. Eric took the lead, leveled his staff, and glared ahead. He didn't say a word, but Annala knew what he was saying to himself. He was blaming himself for letting Nulso past him.

“Eric, listen to me. You shouldn't blame yourself. Only Chaos can defeat Order.”

“Hasina did pretty well.”

“She’s a captain level mercenary, a devout Chaosian and a Greater Mage. You were outclassed, that’s all.”

“I was outclassed against the Black Cloaks and Dengel too, but that didn’t stop me. I found a way around them. I just have to do the same thing here.”

Annala skipped ahead of him and smiled. “I’m sure that’s what your mentor has in mind. So don’t worry, okay?”

“Sure.”

Annala’s apartment was in the public library. There was a room isolated from the main building where a person could live in college comfort. It was sometimes used by students or scholars, but now it had a different resident. Annala’s parents rented it for her use because her elfin status made them too nervous for a dorm setting. For Eric, this meant she lived in the same building that he did shortly after his arrival. He spent more time here than at the Silver Dragon Dormitory for the Displaced.

Did Tasio set that up?

Annala found the keys and unlocked the door. She stood on its border and looked back at Eric.

“Would you like to catch up inside?”

“I’d love to...but I need to check in with my guild. I just wanted to see you home safely.”

“Some other time then.”

The door closed and Eric's face fell.

“Liar,” Tasio hissed.

Eric backhanded him.

“I miss my guild and I miss my training.” He turned around and marched away. “I was useless against Nulso. He defeated me as easily as squashing an ant with his boot. I need to become stronger so that won't happen again.”

Tasio floated alongside Eric. “The Declaration of Protection; how sweet! Next, I assume you’ll talk about promotions.”

“What do promotions have to do with this?”

“As you are now, you’re unable to support a wife.”

“Wife?! I’m not considering that right now.”

“Liar,” Tasio hissed.

Eric ran his hands over his face. “I don’t have the patience for you right now. Tell me how to defeat Nulso or go away.”

At that instant, Tasio’s face became one of predatory glee. “I am always happy to help, Eric, especially if it is for my bestest friend.”

He disappeared, leaving Eric with a sense of impending doom. Sighing, he went home. By the time he reached it, he was exhausted. *I really do need training if this sort of thing wears me out.*

You are a failure, Shadow Dengel said. You always will be.

Eric didn't dignify that with a response. Right now, he definitely felt like a failure. He failed to protect to Annala, failed as a battle mage, and failed as a mercenary. In times like these, his old

passive self would say it was hopeless, give up, and then find something else at which to fail. Right now, it was a tempting prospect. *All I need is a good night's sleep...I hope it's still there...and still open....*

His apartment was a lease from his guild. The Dragon's Lair owned the propriety and lent it to members that required cheap housing. If he had been gone for four months, like Annala said, then it was likely that the Dragon's Lair gave it to someone else. *I'd rather not go back to the Silver Dragon Dormitory for the Displaced...*

He stopped at Cutlass Bridge and descended the staircase to the doorway. Just as he feared, the door was locked. Many wards were placed on his home to protect it from thieves, but they were all for nothing if the door wasn't locked. He counted the bricks until he found the right one and pulled it out. Hidden inside was a deposit box Basilard had showed him how to install. He charged one finger with mana and pressed it on the sensor to release the lock. With the spare key inside, he opened the door and –

No way...

A troll sat at his desk. “Squatting” would be more accurate, as the chair was in pieces. He was broad and stout, and a cloak of coarse material covered him from the neck down. Seeing it in his home, at his desk, on the remains of his chair boiled his blood. Not now! Not when he was finally home!

“What are you doing in my house!?” The troll ignored him, so Eric stomped over and knocked on its head. “Hello! Are you listening!?” The troll took a swing at him, but he grabbed the craggy fist, spun it to the troll's back, and twisted it. The troll squirmed in his grip, so he placed his crystal's edge at its throat. “You're a thief, aren't you?”

“Owww! Let go!” the troll moaned. “What are you doing here, Aaloon?!”

Eric paused. “How do you know Aaloon?”

“I'm renting this apartment!”

“I am renting this apartment! It belongs to *me*.”

“Who *are* you!?”

The human smiled cockily. “Eric Watley, Squad Three Novice in the Dragon's Lair.”

Immediately, the troll stopped struggling. He repeated the name under his breath along with other things Eric didn't catch. Then he explained that because its previous tenant hadn't accepted a mission in over a month, the lease expired and the apartment was given to him. Accepting the logic, Eric grudgingly released him and he turned around.

All of his skin was stony, similar to a golem's. He had a small beard and his oversized nose drooped into it. His ears were square and a birthmark shaped like a trout was on his forehead. In his hand was an abacus and next to his legs was a club.

“I happen to be a novice as well. Billsworth E. Gruffle from Squad One.” He stood to his full height, one head taller than Eric. “I moved here from Anich and I requested this space because I like living under bridges. If you want me to move, you have to compensate me.”

“Fair enough. How much do you want?”

“It's not anything like money because it's something that can't be bought.”

“Spit it out already! I'm tired.”

Gruffle sneered. “Okay then, how about we settle this like mercenaries? You and me, anything goes. If you win, you can move in, but if *I* win, you have to give me that crystal on your staff.”

“What if I can't get it off?”

“Then you'll have to give me the whole thing. Deal?”

The idea made Eric's stomach turn. A mage's staff was an intensely personal belonging; bankruptcy laws at every level of society allowed a mage to keep it, even if they'd lost everything else. There was a universal taboo against touching one. To allow this troll to have it *in addition* to his home was more than Eric could bear.

Shadow Dengel appeared between them. *Failed to protect your girl, too scared to protect your home, and yet you claimed to have changed?*

“Deal.”