

THE SWORD IN THE
DARKNESS CAME FROM
ANOTHER WORLD

Hilene Anilasor

CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

“Ugh, it’s too hooooooooooooooooot.”

It was summer, and I was miserable. If the heat outside wasn’t enough, the AC in the office was set too high. I never handled the heat very well, getting very easily exhausted and irritable. As a result, I usually stayed indoors most of the time during the summer. If it wasn’t for work and shopping, I wouldn’t leave the house.

“You’d be a little bit more comfortable if you wore short sleeves, you know”, said Clarisse, one of my coworkers. She was wearing a flowery, but sedate, one-piece sun dress that I’m sure was keeping her much cooler than the business-casual long-sleeve collared shirt and slacks I was wearing. “I know that the dress code is a bit strict, but it’s got that much flexibility at least.”

“Eh, you know I burn so easily. I need to cover up or else I’ll be paying for it for a week. You probably have it easy in these temperatures, though. Wish they made clothes like that for guys. We get just the dullest options.”

“If you saw the price tag, you might change your mind. Anyway, gotta check up on the imaging again. See ya!”

“Yeah, take care.”

So yeah, I work in IT at a government agency, so not only is the AC mal-programmed, but I’m also surrounded by hot computers all day. Unless I’m on a call, which is why there’s a dress code. Honestly, heat aside I love my job. I’m not normally good at talking and interacting with people, but when I’m doing it as part of my job, helping someone with a problem, I can feel that tension and anxiety just slip away. I just really like helping people.

A little bit later, I was on my way to the break room when I saw another coworker, Beth, struggling to try and get some paper out of the cabinet. She couldn’t have even been 5 feet tall, coming up to my chest, and someone had forgotten to refill the lower shelves so the only copy paper left was too high for here to reach.

“How many reams do you need?” I asked her, as I reached up and grabbed one for her.

“Oh, thanks! Could you get me one more? I’m also getting some paper for the CR.”

“Yeah, no worries,” I respond, grabbing another ream.

“Thank you so much! It’s pretty handy being tall. Not to mention that there’s *some* folks in

the office who conveniently *forget* to take my height into consideration.”

“My pleasure, though being tall isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, either.”

“Hehe, well I guess~. It’s certainly easier for my sweetie to pick me up~.”

“Yeah, and I’m going to be the one expected to do the carrying. I just don’t see myself as that kind of person. I’d rather be the one carried, but where am I going to find someone taller than me?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find someone~. Anyway, I need to get going, I still gotta get the in-clearance forms ready.”

As Beth turned to walk towards her office, however, a man who was walking down the hallway, looking right at us by the way, bumps into her, knocking her over with a yelp.

“Oh sorry, I didn’t *see* you there”, he said, sarcastically.

“Dave, come on. I saw you looking at us from all the way down the hall. Don’t give me that shit.”

“So what if I did. What’re you going to do about it?”

With that, he started laughing as he walked off. Shaking my head, I helped Beth back up and picked up the paper for her.

“Ugh, I don’t care that he’s related to the boss. Someone should really take him down a peg or two,” she said, dusting herself off.

“Yeah, ugh. I think too many of us are just too worried about our jobs to raise a fuss, though.”

“Mmm, that’s not an excuse to let him keep getting away with it. It’ll only encourage others.”

With that, Beth took the paper from me and walked off. For myself, I went and restocked the cabinet before going back to my office to work on an especially troubling glitch. A user was having an issue accessing only some folders in their private drive, but the permissions seem to be set correctly. I ended up spending the rest of my day on this bug, though I did manage to resolve it before I clocked out for the day. To celebrate, and because it was so hot, I picked up an ice cream sandwich from the convenience store around the corner from my apartment, as well as a few extra items I wanted for supper and later tonight. It wasn’t particularly late by the time I finally got in, so I took the time to have a shower before starting supper.

After finally cooling down, it was time to get on my computer and catch up with my online friends. Clearing every unread flag distracted me for a while, especially since there were a lot of conversations going on at the same time. Eventually, supper was ready and I pulled myself away long enough to serve myself some pasta and meatballs before coming back to the computer and logging into Ufao.

Ufao, short for Ultimate Fantasy Online, was a MMO released about 8 years ago, at the end of the period where everything needed an MMO project. Publishers have since moved over to making a mobile game for everything, but Ufao still manages to chug along with it’s devoted fanbase, outlasting almost all of it’s contemporaries. Based on the long-running Ultimate Fantasy franchise of RPGs, Ufao is both it’s own entry into the storied history and also a vehicle for references, callbacks, and fan service. It’s now on it’s third expansion, and I’ve been playing

since it's disastrous launch. Nearly took the company down with it, but the director took the blame and really worked hard to make up for it. A few years back, a friend of mine invited me to start doing end-game raids with his group and I've been playing with them ever since.

But there was more to the game than just fighting monsters and villains. Over the years there's been a number of mini-games and side activities that have been added, but the most important one to me is the monthly Fashion Gala. See, the game not only has a lot of original, classic, and derived equipment, which is displayed on your character model, but over the years the developers have also added a bunch of outfits that have no purpose other than to look good. And the player base latched onto this hard. So, in recognition of this, there is a monthly in-game event where players can submit an outfit based on a theme, and the devs decide which one was the best. I've been competing since the first one, and while I don't always win, I do usually still place highly. I may not be able to wear dresses or skirts or big frilly shirts and blouses in real life, but I can in Ufao. It's not the same, but it helps me feel better about myself regardless.

In any case, I was going to log in today to do some materials farming in order to get ready for the next raid night. We've made it to the last phase of the fight against this expansion's big villain, and just need a little bit more practice before we have it down. I ended up using the last of my consumables in the previous raid night, and I needed to stock back up.

Logging into Ufao, I get prompted to install a patch. This isn't all that unusual, the developers are always fixing and adjusting one thing or another. There was probably a hotfix pushed out during the day. I asked one of my friends, who I only really know as GreenDizer online, if he knows what got changed. I've known him for years, ever since we met on a defunct role-playing message board back when we were both in high school. Those forums are long gone now, but the friendships I made on them have lasted.

"Seems like they pushed a fix for some clipping issues on the new idol skirts, plus that dumb layered skirt you like now plays nice with more tops", he gets back to me, just as the patch finishes installing.

"God, finally. The Quint skirt looks so good, but I can't believe they released it with it breaking on so much clothing. I figured it was going to take another calamity before they fixed it."

For background, the players refer to the disaster of the launch as the Calamity, and the devs have somewhat canonized this into the game's story, saying that your characters were heroes from another realm, brought to the land of Tirmachen to prevent another calamity from happening.

Now that I'm in, I also noticed that the title screen got changed. Instead of the fiery background that they've been using for this expansion, it's instead a model of the crystal used to represent Hyzor, the High God, who brings the player's character into the world and gives them their mission.

"Wonder why they have Hyzor on the title screen now. They don't normally change this until an expansion drops", I asked GreenDizer.

"What do you mean? The title screen looked the same to me when I logged in."

"That's weird", I reply, as I select my character, Lalalie Lily. Lalalie is a girl Earthborne

Plainsfolk, the name the setting gives to what some other settings would call “halflings”; small, cute, maybe childish people. I’ve always liked playing as smaller ladies in games, both video and tabletop. Something about it felt comforting to me. Maybe it was just because I was a tallish guy, and opposites attract, as the saying goes? Though I’ve also been really jealous of people who could be carried in that cradling grip sometimes known as the “princess carry”. But at my height, that was never going to happen. And with my back problems, I’d probably never be able to give someone one instead.

Once the loading bar finished, I wasn’t presented with the city-state of Utani like I expected, since that was where I had last logged out. Instead, I was in a dark void, with only Hyzor’s crystal to keep me company. New players get a screen very similar to this when they make a new character, so I got worried for a moment that something had happened to my character, but then I noticed that Lalalie was also on the screen, dressed in the red bikini I had just gotten from the summer event and had logged out wearing because I hadn’t decided on how/whether I was going to make use of it.

“A threat has arisen in the Land of Beginnings, and only the Sword in the Darkness can banish it”, a text box popped up to say. The player’s character eventually gets the title of “The Sword in the Darkness” as part of the story, after saving the world from a major threat. Since the game also has a lot of voice acting, this title made it easier for NPCs to refer to the player without needing to use the name the player gave them. Which, for some of the other people I see playing now and then, would be downright unpronounceable garbage.

“If you take up arms in defense of those in need, I will grant you power and a new form, based on the shape of your soul. Will you accept the call?” After this text box, I was given a Yes/No prompt. Now I was curious. The game does sometimes give players a dialog choice, but the worst that happens is that it just drops the quest and requires you to pick it back up again. But this was given to me right away, after loading in. I figured it was simply a “But Thou Must” situation, but I... found myself scared to press “No” and find out. I felt like if I picked it, I would be missing out on the opportunity of my life. Besides, I wanted to know what Hyzor meant by the “shape of my soul”. The most recent expansion started talking about the player’s character being the fragment of a soul from an ancient race, and that’s how they received their powers (in fiction, that is). But would this mean that my character model would change? I’d hate that, I spent so long making Lalalie as cute as she was, and I wouldn’t want to change a thing. Except my hair, which I do every now and then. I picked “Yes” anyway.

“Know that answering this call will require you to travel far from home and those you know. There will be danger, and you may never be able to return from whence you came. Will you still take up your arms?” Once again, it asked me “Yes” or “No”. I thought about this one for a moment, but at this point why would I say “No”? This was the kind of mission that the Sword in the Darkness was always given, after all. I picked “Yes” again.

“Thank you, Sword in the Darkness. Rest now, and awaken where you are most needed.” As soon as I saw this text box, I started feeling incredibly drowsy. The last thing I remember seeing was my desk as I slumped over and passed out.

CHAPTER TWO

Waking up in a new world

“...lie.”

“Ugh...”

“...lalie?”

As my consciousness started returning, the first thing I noticed was a dull headache. The second was that I was being shook by someone. The third was that I was being cradled in someone’s arms. Huh, did I fall out of my chair?

I started opening my eyes and was assaulted by a bright light that made the headache flare up, and I instinctively moved a hand in front of my eyes to shield them. This action seemed to excite whoever was holding me, as they started shaking even more vigorously.

“Stop that, Adelwin. You know well enough that you can exasperate injuries like that.”

“But look, she’s moving!”

“I can see that, but she might not for longer with the way you’re shaking her.”

A couple of familiar voices, one male and one female, were arguing right next to me, but I couldn’t quite comprehend what they were talking about. I wanted to yell at them to be quiet, but my head was filled with too much fog to be able to form words.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuugh...”

“Besides, while we know that she is skilled in healing magic, she’s not the only one.”

“Oh, right.”

With those words, I get gently lowered to the ground, which feels much softer than my carpet but still harder than my bed. Where am I? I try moving my head around but it makes the pain turn into a sharp stab, most notably in the neck.

“B...b...qit” was all I was able to say through the pain. But as soon as the... well, calling them words is a bit of a stretch, left my mouth, the light around me got even brighter, and the pain and fog started receding from my head.

“Now, was that so hard Adelwin?” I could more clearly hear the female voice now, so I once

again tried to open my eyes and look in the direction of her voice. Despite the pain fading, my vision was still blurry. It was like when I didn't have my glasses in the morning. All I could make out around me was a lot of green and two fuzzy figures. Two... really tall figures. I reached up to my face instinctively and didn't feel my lenses. I guess they got knocked off when I landed? In a panic, I began to flail around to look for them, but was stopped quickly by a flare-up of the pain.

“Oh, your glasses got knocked away,” said the female voice. “Just hold still for a bit until the spell finishes it's work, I'll find them for you.”

I laid back down and tried to calm down, listening to the rustling around me. I started to squint and tried to make out my surroundings. The green started to look like grass and bushes, and I could begin to make out what looked like trees around me.

“Ah, here they are. Not surprisingly, they got a little cracked by the impact.” Someone took my hand and placed a pair of glasses in them. I hurriedly put them on and, other than the crack going across my right lens, I could now see what was around me. The first thing I noticed, though, was the two people who were in front of me. Both wore very similar outfits; a simple tunic and slacks combo, adorned only by some light armour over vital areas as well as holsters for equipment I couldn't make out at the moment. The one on the right, who was gesturing in my way while chastising the other, had red highlights on their clothes, while the other one had blue. As I looked closer, I could see that they appeared to be twins, which probably explained the matching outfits. I couldn't help but feel like I recognized them from somewhere, though...

“Ok, ok, I got it. You don't need to keep harping at me over the same thing.” The one in blue closed a book I finally could see that he was holding, and put it in a holster on his left hip. “Yes, I lost my cool when she fell out of the cart, but you were the one who leapt out first, before it even stopped moving! You could have been in an even worse state!”

“Someone needed to act! You were just too dumbfounded by what happened to do anything.” The one in red adjusted her hair, which I guessed got messed up by diving through the brush I can now make out around me. Both had a similar style of medium-cut bob with a long braid in the center back, and a short braid in the front; left side for the one in blue, and right side on the one in red. “Still, thank Hyzor it wasn't too serious there, Lalalie. You feel well enough to walk back to the carriage?”

Wait, did she just say ‘Lalalie’? Not only that, but she even said it *right*. Most of my friends would stumble on the weird combination of syllables, even if it was at least mostly lore-accurate. They'd usually just call me by my handle instead. Or my name, which was... Huh? I can't seem to remember. Trying to recall made the headache come back, and though I got a feeling from deep within me that it didn't matter, that not remembering was better for me, I couldn't help but be concerned. I wasn't usually aware that I was forgetting something, after all, and the fact that I could tell this knowledge was missing worried me.

Still deep in thought, I stand up and start to look around. I suddenly notice that it's not just the two of them that seem huge, but in fact... everything seems taller than I was expecting. Nothing about these trees and bushes makes them seem exceptionally large, especially when compared to the twins, but they still towered over me. I have always been among the tallest in

any group, so it was feeling very strange to have the tables turned around like this. Strange... but somehow comforting? I never felt bad about being tall; there's a lot of benefits that come from it, after all. But at the same time, I always wished I could have been short. It's really cute, you know?

"That one might not be salvageable this time, Lalalie. Keep saying that you should wear something more rugged, then you wouldn't need to spend so much of your money on repairs", said the one in blue. I looked down and saw two things. First, I realized I couldn't see past my chest. A very large bulge was much higher up on my torso than I was expecting to see. At that point I also realized an unexpected weight, and shifted slightly to counter-balance unconsciously, as if I always knew how.

The next thing I noticed was a very familiar outfit. One I would never forget, as it was the first one I put together to win the weekly fashion competition in Ufao. I twisted around to get a better look at the light blue blouse with a flowery motif, over a white camisole, with a pale pink skirt over blue/white/pink striped over-the-knee socks and a rugged pair of low-ankle boots. My friends always would tease me about how "un-adventurer" I looked, but it didn't matter. Fashion was the real endgame, and I was good at it. Sadly, the outfit was now ripped and torn in a bunch of places, and it was stained in others with a combination of dirt, grass, and blood.

"And I really liked this outfit, too", I couldn't help but say. But... something sounded different about my voice. Higher pitched, *cuter*. I put my hands over my mouth in shock, and at that point finally noticed how *small* they looked. It wasn't that I was surrounded by unusually tall people, I had actually *shrunk*. I began to twist back and forth again, looking all over my body in more detail now that I got over the shock of seeing the outfit in tatters, and saw some of the same equipment harnesses on my back and hips, with there being a similar book to the one in blue in a hip harness. But it also became even clearer to me that I was no longer 6 feet, but was instead closer to half that height. I made a note to get measured at my earliest opportunity.

"Phew, good to see you're back to normal then, Lalalie", the one in red said. At this point, I needed to know for sure. I start looking around me more, and eventually found an adventurer's bag that I guess got thrown off when I landed. It's really more of a shoulder bag than a backpack, to better suit this outfit, but in the game it didn't matter how it looked, they all could hold the same number of items. Digging through, I found a mirror, took it out, and looked at myself. The face I saw wasn't the one I was used to from my 36 years of life, instead I saw the youthful and cute face I had created for Lalalie Lily, 20 year old adventurer. She had the same gray eyes as I did, as I always felt good about that unique aspect of myself, plus long brownish-red curly hair. It looked like the hair was originally done up in some kind of twin-tail, but it was currently in disarray due to my tumble. I had felt a brush in the bag, so I'll fix it up later. Also, my face was fairly scraped up though I could see the marks starting to fade as the magic was finishing the job. Instead, I could tell that my makeup was ruined, making me look more like a clown than a cute girl. I suddenly recalled that I knew how to fix this, and shook my head at the thought. How could I know this? I've never done makeup, though I've wanted to learn for as long as I could remember.

At this point I was finally able to put the pieces together. When Hyzor said they had a special mission only I could perform, they were not talking about an in-game event. It wasn't

just another plot hook, I... was actually here. In what seemed to be the Gapsara Woodlands, just outside of Utani, alongside the elfin Treefolk twins Adelais and Adelwin who are childhood friends, and the first companions the player meets in the story. In fact, this whole scenario is... just like the scene right after character creation. There, Adelais and Adelwin help the player after they fall out of a carriage heading in to Utani, and as they help the player up they ask them some questions that finish up the character creation process, such as name, origin, and starting class. But in this case, they seem to have skipped this. Probably because my “character creation” is already complete?

Walking back to the carriage, I started to wonder if this is what Hyzor meant by “The form of my soul”. Adelais tossed a cloak over me to cover up my torn-up clothes before we boarded, and as it started moving again I was thinking deeply about what had just happened. I was very torn over how I was feeling. I had come to terms already that I would never feel “correct”, whatever that meant. But here I was, given the body of my Ufao character, the one I felt the most comfortable playing of any custom created avatar. I had even planned to commission a friend of mine to help me make a virtual streamer avatar of her. But wanting to *be* her? I... I don't know about that. This couldn't be what I wanted. I don't deserve it...

But at the same time, I had a deep feeling of satisfaction. Of *rightness*. I couldn't square away these conflicted feelings. Not yet, at least. I wasn't sure that the later was even a true feeling, yet. What if Hyzor is doing this to me to get me to feel indebted? It wouldn't be beyond a god to play with the emotions of a mortal, right? Especially one able to work with souls like Hyzor apparently can? In fact, if this body had already existed in the world, as it appears to have been the case, what happened to the soul that would have been in here already? Did Hyzor kill a person and have me take over their body? Or is she still there, underneath it all, and that's what makes me feel “right”? I don't have the answers I need, so I'll do what they ask of me for the moment, but I have to be cautious in the future to make sure I'm not just their puppet.

In any case, as I was lost in thought over this, we had reached Utani. I hadn't even noticed until Adelwin shook me out of my trance because we had arrived at the station. I'll have time to think about this tonight. For now, I need to keep my mind on what's in front of me, as I stepped out of the carriage and followed the twins.

CHAPTER THREE

Utani - City of Life

Just outside of the carriage, I met up with Adelais and Adelwin who were taking some luggage off of the storage racks on the back of the carriage.

“Here’s yours”, Adelais said, tossing a bag my way. It was, appropriately enough, smaller than the backpacks the two of them were putting on. I followed suit, and then the three of us left the station.

“So, where to first?” I asked. I remembered that the quest you got after arriving in town would have you run around and get introduced to the important locations, such as the inn, the class trainers, and the special shops. But since this seems to be the actual world, maybe things would be different.

“We should find lodgings,” said Adelwin.

“We should go register at the guild,” said Adelais, at the same time. They turn and look at each other.

“Ok, how about we just look around first, then?” I jump in, before they start fighting. “We’re not going to get anywhere just standing here and bickering, and we need to get our bearings in town anyway if we’re going to be working out of here for the next while.” I kind of feel excited about being here at all, but I wanted more time to think about the situation as well. I was starting to feel out of sorts with how different my view of the world was. Though... it was also kind of good. It was hard to really describe what I was feeling.

Utani is one of the starting towns that players could choose when they make a new character. It was the capital of the Windborne Union, nestled deep within the Gapsara Woodlands. The Windborne Union was comprised of the lands of the elf-like Treefolk, the primate-like Branchfolk, the fairy-like Spiritfolk, and the insectoid Valefolk.

For reference, the world was split into four major countries: The Windborne Union in the south, the Earthborne Kingdom to the west, the Fireborne Empire to the north, and the Waterborne Alliance to the east. Each country was then home to some of the major races of the world. The Earthborne Kingdom was the lands of the diminutive Planesfolk, the feline-like Hillfolk, the bear-like Clawfolk, and the plant-like Greenfolk. The Fireborne Empire was the lands of the reptilian Scalefolk, the otherworldly Voidfolk, the bovine-like Rockfolk, and the equine-like Hooffolk. The Waterborne Alliance was the lands of the fish-like Seafolk, the

bunny-like Bushfolk, the canine-like Dunesfolk, and the bird-like Skyfolk.

This didn't mean they were all bound to their nations, either. We could see all of them wandering around the city, living their lives. In the game, the only NPCs they would spawn tended to be related to a quest or event, or were otherwise interactable. The cities were usually made to feel "lived in" by the number of players who would run around, taking care of whatever business they had. While it made sense in a game development sense, it could still sometimes feel empty. But this? This felt *real*. A weird thing to say, since it *was* real, but this was much different from in the game. I was living in a medium-sized city, so this was more bustling than I was used to, but it was a very similar feel.

Oh, and by the way, the game didn't have a "human" race. The developers had said that since all of the races were, essentially, "Human Plus Something", then what was the value? To "compensate", the Treefolk character creator had options to minimize the elfin features, but otherwise there was no "official" generic "human" race. I was never bothered by this, personally, but there were a lot of people on the Internet that complained constantly, claiming discrimination.

In any case, for as familiar as I used to be with the layout of Utani, it was a lot different from the ground level. Especially since I was so much closer to the ground. Utani was designed as a kind of split level city, with a lot of the businesses and traveler services on the ground, while a lot of the administrative services were up in the tree lines, built into the boughs. You know, the fairly traditional elfin type of city. And from the carriage depot, I could see the start of the residential district, somewhere the game developers didn't bother to fully model since players were not going to go there anyway. Residential districts in games are usually made way smaller than is realistic.

That said, the residential district seems more open than it was in the game. Originally, there was kind of a wall here, with a gate and a guard who would help direct the player into the right residential district, which was the developers' way of making distinct "instances" of the same area that players could buy houses in. I wondered if the residential district was organized in the same way as in the game, with dozens upon dozens of housing areas that were completely identical. I couldn't tell from here.

If I had an opportunity later, I wanted to take a walk through there. I always liked looking at how people decorated their houses in the game.

All of this was just inside the city gates, connected to the main road through the center of the city, and as we walked down it I made note of a number of clothing stores along the way.

"We should probably find a place you can get some new clothes, Lalalie", said Adelais. I nodded in agreement. This cloak covered me enough for the moment, but it was way too large for me, being as it was made for a Treefolk. I was getting a fair number of looks from other people on the street, as it dragged behind me, even after I had tried to wrap the tail around me. Also it was hard to walk in, with my shorter legs regularly getting tangled up in the extra material.

"Hey, how about that place there?" I pointed over to a little shop that looked like it specialized in equipment for adventurers. Specifically, I saw a really cute looking armoured sun dress that was hanging in the display window. It was a light green with a leafy pattern on it, and

had leather plates incorporated into the design over vital areas, looking like tree trunks.

“I know what it is you’re looking at, Lalalie, and I doubt you have anywhere near enough money at the moment for it. But we can go in and see what they have for basic shirts,” Adelais replied.

“We spent almost everything we saved up just to get here. Until we get some work, we need to be careful with our money,” chipped in Adelwin.

That made me wonder how much money we had, actually. Normally I could pull up a menu and it would show me all my currencies, but I’ve been trying everything I could think of to see if there’s any kind of “status screen” I could pull up to no success. At this point, I decided to start digging through my shoulder bag to see if I could find a wallet or something. After a few moments, I pulled out a jingling sack and opened it up to take a look. Inside I saw a number of coins of various sizes and colours. Just as I was thinking I had no idea what they all meant, I was struck with a memory of counting up my savings before leaving home, and then I was able to figure out what each coin was. At that point, though, Adelwin looked over my shoulder. “Looks like you still have 52 jeel left. With my 108 and my sister’s 96 we should have enough for at least tonight. Maybe my sister is right and we should just go right over to the guild and make sure we can afford the registration fee, in case there is one. If so, we can hopefully find a job to help cover the difference. If not, then we can finish the administration and then find an inn.”

“I told you so,” Adelais replied.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. Let’s just go, then.”

“Aww, and I like that dress, too...” I said.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Guild

After asking a local town guard for directions, it turned out that we had already walked past the guild building. It was built in a convenient location for adventurers and mercenaries, as it was near the gate that we entered through. Just, in the opposite direction that we walked after leaving the carriage station. It was nestled close to the city walls, with a number of inns in close proximity. This actually wasn't how it was in the game, which surprised me. Players actually ended up at an inn much further in the city, and dealt with a guild liaison that was stationed there. I do remember the carriage station, but it only came up as part of the intro cutscenes.

Finally, we ended up at the entrance to the guild.

“Well, we finally arrived,” said Adelwin.

“Our dream starts here,” said Adelais.

I simply nodded and pushed open the door. The inside was... well, basically a pub. A few folks were sitting at tables or booths having a drink of some kind, but otherwise it was fairly empty. On the left side was what looked like the bar itself, with a door behind that I imagined led to a kitchen since I could smell something good in the air. On the right was a number of teller windows. Roughly half of them were currently empty, presenting a sign that read “Please See Next Window”. Of the remaining half, a few of the tellers were dealing with people at the moment already. I started walking to the closest open one, but as I got close I realized that the window itself was above my head.

“Hey, what's with the height on the windows,” Adelais asked. “You don't get many Plainsfolk in here?”

“Oh, is this your first time here? There's a fold-out step stool just under the ledge that your friend can use. All of the windows are equipped with one,” said the male Hillfolk teller. I looked and found the latch for the step stool and got it set up.

“Hup, thanks!” I said, getting onto the stool and could now look at the teller. He was dressed in a pretty smart looking burgundy blazer with a white shirt underneath.

Looking around, I noticed that this seemed to be the employee uniform, with some employees wearing an ankle-length burgundy skirt and some wearing burgundy slacks. I guessed it was up to employee preference, too, as there was no obvious gender separation between who wore what. I could see a Treefolk employee who seemed to be presenting male wandering through the pub area prepping tables wearing the skirt, while one of the assumed women tellers was wearing the slacks (another Hillfolk) and the other was wearing the skirt (a Bushfolk). This made me think back at how long it was that players were petitioning the

developers to have fewer gender-locked pieces of clothing. A lot of players were upset at the number of pieces that could only be used by men or women, especially the fairly large queer community that grew around Ufao. While he wasn't among that community, GreenDizer was regularly complaining that the bunnygirl outfit was gender locked, because he wanted to wear the ears.

"My name is T'Gria Alok. How may I assist you today?", the teller asked.

"We're here to apply to join the guild," Adelais quickly responded.

"Oh ho, is that so. Well, you arrived at a good time. This month's recruitment test is scheduled for this Firesday. If I can have you all fill out these forms, we can have you booked for a slot."

"Excellent," I said, taking the forms and handing them over to Adelais and Adelwin.

"You can sit down over at the tables to fill them out, if that's more comfortable. Come on back over here when you're done."

"Much appreciated," replied Adelwin.

We walked over to a table and sat down. I needed to grab a booster along the way, and they were in a convenient location. The form was pretty boilerplate; name, age, hometown, specialization, and an understanding of the risks and dangers of adventuring contracts. This wasn't how it worked out in the game, where you basically ended up in an adventure right away and was embroiled in a plot against the government of the Windborne Union. By the time anyone thought about having the player register, they were already being called the Sword in the Darkness. I... kind of appreciated this being a little bit more low-key. I think I need some time to process what was going on. The Specialization field was a pair of multiple-choice selections, with one being Ranged or Melee, and the second one being Physical or Magical. I could tell by the book in my holster that I was using the Scriptor skillset, so I checked off Ranged and Magical, but I was going to need to find some time before Firesday to figure out how it worked.

For a very long time while I was playing Ufao I was maining the Scriptor class, but recently I had changed to one of the new ones in the latest expansion. It was called... huh. I can't seem to remember. But in any case, I am familiar with the role of a Scriptor. They're primarily healers, supporting the party from the rear with heals and buffs. I've always felt more comfortable in a support role, so it was the perfect class for me. That said, I was still tinkering with other classes as well, as one of the features that set Ufao apart from its competition was that players were not restricted to one class per character, and in fact were encouraged to diversify. I can't tell if it's possible for me to be able to do similar here. Hopefully I can find out, but even if I can't I'm excited to see what it's like to use Scriptor skills for real.

"Not much to this application, is there..." mentioned Adelwin. "I guess the recruitment test is more important."

"I figure they need these details for our identification more than anything else," I responded. "Well, think that's it. You both done yet?" I had been taking a peek at both of them as they filled out their forms, trying to make sure I was filling in the right information. I could tell that I could read the Tirmachen alphabet easily, and I was unconsciously writing using it despite not having had any prior experience, so it seemed that if nothing else, that knowledge was ingrained into this body. Or something?

"Yep, like you said 'win, there's not much to put down. Let's hand these over and then find a

place to stay for the next couple of days,” said Adelais.

One of the employees, the male Treefolk in a skirt, came over to clean up the table after we left, and I put the booster seat back where I found it. When we returned to the teller window, we handed our forms over to T’Gria, who reviewed them to make sure they were complete.

“Looks like everything is as it should be. Dendrobium Springs, eh? Isn’t that where the current arena champion is from?”

“Yeah, they’re the pride of the village. A lot of people have been inspired by their accomplishments, and have started looking for more... exciting work than the rural life offers,” Adelwin responded.

“Guess we’re among that group,” replied Adelais, with a chuckle.

“Heh, guess so. Well, like I said, the recruitment tests will be in two days. We offer discounted lodgings at the inns next to the Guild. Just present this coupon to the receptionists in order to obtain the special rate. The practice grounds are open from the top of Morn to the bottom of Arvy, and registration for the recruitment test will be at 700 on Firesday. Are there any questions?”

“Is there a fee for taking the recruitment test?” Adelwin asked.

“No, we are always looking for new talent, and don’t want to turn away those who are down on their luck.”

“Thank you, I think that’s all we need for the moment,” Adelwin replied. He turns to Adelais and myself and says “It’s starting to get late and it’s been a long and tiring journey, so how about we go get the room, have something to eat, and then turn in early?”

“Yeah, that sounds like a plan to me. Though I do still need to get some new clothes,” I replied.

“At this point, how about we worry about it tomorrow? Besides, you have at least one spare set in your pack anyway,” Adelais said.

T’Gria, the professional that he was, didn’t seem to be reacting to my over-large cloak and the glimpses of torn clothing underneath it. I guess he probably sees this sort of thing pretty frequently. In any case, agreeing on our next course of action, we thank T’Gria for his assistance and leave the Guild.

Relatedly, the game did represent the passage of time from this world. For game purposes, a single day was comprised of 20 hours of 100 minutes each, split into quarters that defined Dawn (000 to 499), Morn (500 to 999), Arvy (1000 to 1499), and Dusk (1500 to 1999). Day was thus normally considered to be Morn and Arvy, while Night was normally considered to be Dusk and Dawn. But to the player, this all passes over the course of an Earth hour. Then the days are combined into 6 days per week, 4 weeks per month, and 7 months per year, with the days of the week named after the primary elements of the world: Voidday, Fireday, Iceday, Terraday, Windday, and Lightday. This means that, to the player, Every 6 hours is the passing of a week, every day is the passing of a month, and every week is the passing of a year. Though the only place where this matters is that quests, raid lock-outs, and trade-in limits get reset by the “week”, the “month”, or the “year”. Characters in the game never reacted to the passage of time, nor seemed to get older. At least, not until a story beat hit that required the passage of time. Seasonal events also were tied to the real world year, even if this results in these events being only once every decade or so in-universe.

CHAPTER FIVE

Confessions and Memories

[Placeholder]

Sleep didn't come easily, as I spent a while rolling over the events of the day in my head. I knew that I had pretty much accepted it before we arrived in Utani, but now that I was here, in a bed in an inn, with Adelais and Adelwin in separate beds, I was having another freak-out about what I had found myself in. How could I be actually here, in the world of Ufao? It was just a game! Hyzor wasn't real, none of this should be. Am I dreaming? But that couldn't be the case, since I woke up feeling pain. That's right, isn't it? You can't feel pain in a dream?

But also I knew that I couldn't stay on that hope for long. Too much has happened for this to be anything but my new reality. After tossing and turning a bit, I got out of bed to get a drink and try to calm my nerves. As I was pouring myself a glass from the pitcher on the table in the middle of the room (while standing on a booster seat for the chair to pour, then sitting down on it afterwards), I heard some rustling behind me and saw that Adelais was also awake.

"Sorry, hope I didn't disturb you", I said.

"Don't worry about it. Are you alright?"

"Not sure. Can't sleep, too much on my mind."

"I could tell. You haven't seemed like yourself since the fall. You want to talk about it?", she responded, lighting a small oil lamp and bringing it over to the table.

"Hmm, and here I thought I was doing a good job covering it up."

"You know you can't keep anything from me, Lalalie. You were never good at it."

As she said that, memories appeared in my vision from what seemed to be my childhood. I grabbed onto my head as the rush came over me, scenes of me and a younger Adelais playing, while Adelwin was reading some book. Scenes of the three of us experimenting with magic. Scenes of us facing down our first monster, as it threatened our village. A scene of the two of them comforting me as I cried, but I couldn't remember why. The images started to swirl and blend together, faster and faster until they just... stopped. I realized at that point that I had been gripping my head hard enough to cause bleeding, and was gasping heavily.

"Another vision?" asked Adelais.

"Yeah..." I responded, before I could realize that I didn't know what she had meant by 'another'.

"What did you see?"

“... my past. Our past.”

Adelais's face suddenly took on a serious look, and she stood up and walked over to her bag. After digging around in it for a moment, she came back with an envelope.

“I thought we had a little bit more time,” she said, clearly trying to hold back some emotion.

“What do you mean?”

“Just... read the letter.”

I took the envelope from her, noticing that it was addressed to “Lalalie Lily” in what looked like my own handwriting. I opened it up, and inside was a single page.

“You're probably wondering what this is all about,” the letter started. “The truth is I always knew this was eventually going to happen. I've been able to see visions as far back as I could remember. Most of them were of a strange world I had never seen, but there was also a number of visions of Hyzor. They told me that I had been chosen. That someday, they would come for me, because they needed a vessel in this world for the person who would become a great hero, and that my reward will be to travel to a new world. That they had been preparing me for this day by showing me what was to come, and how I could be ready to live in it. I know that if you're reading this, you will be worried about what happened to me, so be at ease to know that all is well. Adelais and Adelwin know that this is going to happen, so you can rely on them to help you settle in case my memories miss something. They've always been so much better at the thinking side than I was. Especially Adelwin.”

I sorrowfully chuckled at that last sentence, recalling so many times that I... Lalalie? Leapt into action only to get bogged down or in over my head, and was saved by at least one of the twins.

“They will be your closest allies and friends, as they were to me. You can trust them with your life, as I did. I know not when the time will come, but I pen this letter in advance to tell you that you need not worry about me. I was never meant to live this life, I was always just keeping it safe for you. This is who you were meant to be. I wish you the blessing of the Circle.”

By the time I was finished reading the letter, I couldn't stop crying. I then heard sniffing, and saw that Adelais had finally let her mask drop. When she saw that I was done, she scooted over and gave me a hug, as we both cried until our eyes were dry.

Some time later, after we both calmed down, Adelais poured us both another glass of water, took a sip, and then leaned over.

“So, what's your name,” she asked.

“... Lalalie Lily?”

“No, ugh. I mean, what *was* your name.”

“So, funny story about that, but I can't seem to remember. I still have my memories of my original life, but any memory about my identity feels like it's being held just out of reach.”

“Huh. Were you told that this was going to happen?”

“Not at all, I honestly got barely any kind of explanation. Hyzor asked me to be their champion, and then I woke up after having fallen from the carriage.”

“Huh, since then, was it? Yeah, that makes sense. Lalalie was pretty tense on the carriage ride, but after we got back in she... you were tense for a different reason, I could feel. I guess she was wondering when it would happen.”

“Did... she tell you anything about what was going to happen?”

Adelais took another drink. She was clearly weighted down by the question.

“A bit...”, she finally said. “She claimed to not know much, but I could tell she was hiding something. The way she arranged the day of our departure from Dendrobium Springs smells to me like she knew when, if not also where.”

“Mmm, that makes sense to me. The way I woke up with you both there was from...”

I realized that I probably couldn't explain that the world they lived in, and that I now found myself in, was a video game where I had come from.

“... Uh, a vision I had.”

“You're an even worse liar than Lalalie was.” Her eyes narrowed as she said this.

“Did she tell you much about where I came from?”

“A little. She said that tech like what the Empire uses is commonplace, and that it's more peaceful than here. You didn't have to deal with things like monsters.”

“Well, not like you know them, at least.” I took another sip of my water.

“So, you gonna actually tell me?”

“... honestly, I don't know how to really explain it, and I probably shouldn't just yet.”

“Mmm. Well, I didn't push Lalalie, so it's only fair that I don't push you.”

“I appreciate it.”

We both sat in silence for a bit after that, finishing up the water in our glasses, and then refilled them once more.

“So, what now, then?” I finally asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You know I'm not the person you knew. In fact, I likely caused her loss. I... would understand if you want me to just leave. I don't want to cause you both any more suffering.”

“You leaving would cause us even more suffering. We knew this was coming, and promised Lalalie that we would take care of you when she was gone. Besides, if you left right now, would you even know how to use that book?”

Adelais points at the book in the harness that I had slung over the end of the bed.

“Honestly, conceptually I know what it's capable of, but you're probably right that I would need training to figure out how it works here.”

“We can start training in the morning, then. Hopefully that'll also trigger a vision as well. The recruitment test is in only two days, after all.”

“Mmmhmm,” was all I could say. I knew what the Scriptor class was capable of from the game, but it was structured as distinct abilities you could just press a button to activate. Unless magic worked in a similar way here, I would have to learn it pretty much from scratch. And unlike earlier in the day, thinking about this wasn't pulling up any visions or memories. But considering how exhausted I was now, maybe something was trying to protect me from further harm.

I finished up my glass and set it down, getting off of the chair and (literally) climbing back into bed (does this place not get many Planesfolk? Why is the mattress at eye level for me??).

“Thank you for the talk, Adelais. I... I don't know if I can ever make it up to you, but I will do my best.”

“It's the least I could do in honour of the memory of my best friend,” she replied. “By the way, before you go to bed, how does it feel in that body?”

“Honestly, like it was made for me. I never felt this... right in my old body. But at the same time, with the visions and the holes in my memory, I can't trust that this feeling isn't fake in some way. I... Mmm...”

“Well, I’m sure Lalalie would be pleased to know it suits you. I can’t count the number of times she would make a comment about wanting to be a big strong male Rockfolk if she was ever reincarnated.”

“Ha, if we traded bodies, she might be a little disappointed, then. I used to be really tall, but I wasn’t that muscular. I had confidence in my strength, at least. I wonder if it’s still appropriate to call her ‘she’, then.”

“I guess there’s no way to know for certain, is there?” she replied, crawling back into bed herself after putting the cups away, before blowing out the oil lamp. “In any case, rest well. We’re going to be busy come the morning.”

“You’re right. Good night.”

My worries must have been salved from that talk, as sleep took me very quickly this time.

CHAPTER SIX

Preparing for the Test

That night, I dreamed of home. As if from above, I watched myself waking up at my desk, as if taking a nap. “I” then started looking around, as if inspecting myself, then “I” wandered around my apartment for a bit, seemingly excited over something. The dream ended as “I” returned to my computer, and started looking at the screen, at which point I realized that what was displayed on there was what appeared to be... Lalalie Lily, sleeping in a bed...

I woke up with a start, nearly leaping straight out of bed and startling Adelais. She was already up and dressed, and was doing something at the foot of my bed.

“Had a bad dream?”

“N...ot really. I dreamed of... myself? I could see myself back in my original world.”

“Huh. Maybe it was Hyzor wanting to give you assurances?”

I shrugged and hopped out of bed. This was... a bad idea, though, as the motion caused my chest to rise up then drop quickly, throwing me off balance and also hurting a *lot*.

“Oooooooh ugh, that was a bad idea...”, I managed to groan.

“You’re telling me. Come on over here and let me help you get dressed.”

“I don’t need your help getting dressed...”

“Uh huh. Do you know how to put a bra on?”

“Do I really need to? Clothing is clothing, right?”

“Oh come on. You literally just experienced why, and you’re gonna tell me that?” Adelais put her hands on her hips and stared at me. I could see that she was holding a bra in her left hand. I looked away, embarrassed.

“Seriously?”, I heard her say. “You’re gonna be like this now, after last night?”

“T...that was different.”

“Uh huh. Now come on over here and let me help you get dressed.”

It was around this time that the door opened and Adelwin walked in, holding a large tray of food.

“You’re still not dressed yet? Hurry up, we only have today to get you up to speed before the recruitment test,” he said, as he placed the tray on the table in the room.

“Can you believe that she’s *embarrassed* about this?”

“Only a little.”

Adelwin shrugged at this, then went to prepare his gear. Adelais took this moment to leap over from the foot of the bed and grab me by the collar and pulled the nightie off.

“Aaah!”

“Alright, now that we’ve taken care of that…”

I’ll spare you the details, but over the next few minutes, Adelais expertly helped me get dressed into a light green blouse with jean-like pants, after which we quickly ate and then left the inn.

By the way, during that whole encounter, Adelwin was just sitting on his bed reading a book.

Outside, the twins started heading towards the city gate. “I know there’s a training area inside the guild, Lalalie, but do you want to have folks watching you as you potentially learn from scratch?” asked Adelais.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea, no. So, we’re going to find a quiet place outside to train instead?”, I responded.

“That’s the plan,” said Adelwin. “I saw some places that will probably work for us nearby as we were reaching the city yesterday.”

“Turns out my brother noticed the change right away. He remembered that the outfit you got all torn up was actually Lalalie’s least favourite one”

“I was wondering why she picked that one specifically to travel in. I don’t know if she knew it was going to get torn up, or if she knew you liked it, but regardless of the reason I had figured that the change happened then due to how you reacted. I just wasn’t sure until this morning, when Adelais told me about your talk last night.”

“I can’t believe that I didn’t notice that…”

By this point, we had left the city walls, then turned right and were now approaching the nearby forests. Just before them was a low hill, and that’s where Adelwin seemed to be taking us.

“Once we’re past that hill, we’ll be safe from view from passers-by, and we’ll also be far enough away that should we have an accident, no one should be hurt,” he said.

I nodded, and walked up and over the hill, to a small clearing on the other side. Once we all arrived, Adelwin took some materials from his bag out, and handed them to Adelais, who started laying them out around the area.

“So, first things first. How much do you know about the forms of magic in this world?”, Adelwin asked.

“Hm. Let’s just say that I have an abstract understanding. I am familiar with the results, but not how to form them.”

“Alright. Starting from scratch is going to take more time, but hopefully we’ll trigger a vision along the way.”

I nodded, and Adelwin took his book out of his holster.

“First things first, magic is done through the absorption and release of aether, a fundamental energy of this world. Aether infuses everything around us, so the first step is being able to feel it’s flow. Now, the ability to feel aether is not universal, but since Lalalie could do it I’m sure it’s something you will be able to as well.”

“Seems sensible. Is feeling the flow something people just naturally awaken to, or is there

training that is involved in finding out if someone has that gift?”

“Good question. There’s usually a sign during childhood that suggests the ability, such as hearing certain noises or seeing certain symbols. Or, in some cases, unconsciously using some minor spells. So, first, I want to know if you can see this.”

Adelwin holds up his book, open to what seems to be a blank page. No... wait... It’s blank, but it seems like something has been erased recently, and it’s too faded to make out.

“I... that page looks like something used to be written on it,” I say, squinting to try and make it out.

“Promising. I was expecting it to take longer to get to this point. Alright then, now, I want you to close your eyes and try to focus on this page.”

I followed his instructions, though I wasn’t quite sure how this was going to help. At this point, I was starting to accept what was happening, though I still had my doubts about the way I felt in this body.

As soon as I closed my eyes, I noticed that I was seeing more than I expected to. There was suddenly a bunch of lines within my vision, in a way that looked different from seeing light shine through the veins. They were still very fuzzy and hard to make out, but I could see a bunch of them converging round where I knew Adelwin was standing. I tried to focus on that spot, and I could see the lines around it start to sharpen up, as I started to hear... a familiar sound. When I was younger, I was able to hear what I thought was the sound of electricity, as it went through a CRT. It turned out to not be the case, but I still heard a very distinct buzz whenever I was near a high powered screen. As I started to concentrate on the sound as well, I began to see more and more lines, just around the periphery of my vision, going in all sorts of directions.

“Focus on the book for now, Lalalie,” I suddenly heard break through the buzz. I shook my head for a moment and put my focus back on the lines going in front of me. Eventually, the lines came into sharp focus, and I could see a word written in the darkness.

“...Congratulations?”

I thought I could see some other words, just hovering outside of my line of sight, but every time I tried to focus on them, they would fade or move out of the way.

“A basic test, but effective. Now that you can see the flow, the next step is to learn how to grasp and direct it,” said Adelwin.

At that, we spent the rest of the morning making sure I had a solid understanding of how to handle aether. We ate a quick lunch of travel rations we had left over from the journey, as I laid down to try and rest my back. After we finished, and I felt a bit better. Adelwin began the afternoon’s lessons.

“Alright, so when it comes to casting magic, there’s two main schools. The first school, called conjuring, imagines the desired effect and feeds the aether into a focus that helps them create that effect. This is the most common school of magic, as it is much easier to teach people how to visualize their results, especially when pre-defined ‘spells’ can be taught to help the focus. As a result, conjurers tend to be pretty consistent across users, with the main difference being how well the individual can grasp and store the aether. While Lalalie did have skill at this form of magic, where she actually excelled was in the other school, scripting,” Adelwin explained.

“You use scripting as well, don’t you, ‘win?’” I asked.

“Indeed, while my sister uses conjuring to enhance her melee skills”

“And I’m really good at it, too,” she quipped.

“Back on track, the difference between scripting and conjuring is that scripting makes use of chaining together runes and sigils that define the magical effects, and then flowing aether through it in order to create the effect.”

Hearing this explanation made the fact that sriptors wrote in their books as part of their casting animation make sense to me. Sriptors literally programmed their spells, and the writing was them making whatever adjustments were required before casting them. Since sigils controlled all the aspects of the spell, then how you targeted a spell would itself have to be a sigil that would need to be adjusted each time. I suddenly felt like I had a solid understanding of what scripting was, but I still wasn’t getting any visions or memories back about what sigils Lalalie had known.

“Ok, you describing it like that make me think of something I used to do in my old world, though while some people would have called it magic, it wasn’t quite the same thing,” I said.

“That should make this easier, then. If you already have a grasp on the logic, then we only need to teach you sigils and how they connect. Have you gotten any memories yet?”

“Not yet, but how about we get started and see what happens.”

After that, we spend the rest of the afternoon on studying and applying various sigils. By the end of it, I had a good grasp on the core logic and targeting sigils, and had a good grasp on a few of the effect modifying ones. With this knowledge, I should be more than capable of passing the recruitment test.

Most importantly, I was able to understand some of the spells Lalalie had already written in her book, which included one that affected gravity in a very local area, which took a huge weight off of my shoulders. I had to be careful about ones like this, because while it’s possible to write scripts that are continually active, they will also require some degree of concentration in order to continue to flow aether into the script. This meant that if I wrote too many, I may either not be able to concentrate enough to finish an attack or support spell, or I may be draining too much aether from the area around me to make them work.

While I clearly still had a lot more to learn about scripting and aether, we were running out of daylight. Besides, I only need enough to pass the recruitment test, and we can work on more later. Even if all I can do right now is just activate the spells left behind in this book, that should be enough.

By the time we made it back to the city, it was already starting to get dark, so we decided to return to the inn to eat, clean up, and get ready for the next morning. Supper at the inn was a simple stew made from a number of ingredients that I recognized from the game. There was a pretty decently sized community of players who liked to try to recreate recipes from the game using ingredients from our world, but who would have thought that someday I’d be able to actually try the real thing?

After supper I went with the twins to the public bath and got cleaned up from the day’s

training. For a few jeel more, they even had a laundry service, so our clothes would be cleaned and dried by the time we were done. Then, with my hair still in a towel, I was back in the inn room, looking over an old notebook I had found in the shoulder bag. For the most part, the bag only held daily supplies in it; clothes, toiletries, makeup, the like. I'll have to have Adelais teach me about most of these another day.

The diary just had some simple details about Lalalie's daily life for the past few years. The way it was written in here made it seem like it was meant for me, like some kind of way by which she could pass on things I should know about her life until now. I made a note to study this diary a little bit each night before bed. For tonight, despite how tired I was feeling after manipulating all that aether and having such a relaxing bath, I read a passage about a day where Lalalie went to town with her parents. It seems she was always a single child, wishing to have siblings, which made me hope that she can get along well with my sisters. It also looked like she had a good relationship with her parents, who had moved to Dendrobium Springs when her father, a decorated Rockfolk knight from the Windborn Union army, had retired in order to spend more time with his Planesfolk wife, who was working in the area as a researcher.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Lightbringer Test Begins

When we arrived at the guild, there was already a crowd waiting for the registration to open.

“Do either of you know if this is normal?” I asked the twins.

“From what I’ve heard, yes,” replied Adelwin.

“While it’s possible to be given entrance to the Lightbringers via exceptional displays of courage and selflessness, there also needs to be a senior Lightbringer there to witness it in the first place, so it rarely happens. Most people have to go through this process, which weeds out those without the temperament necessary,” added Adelais.

As I pondered that, and how it differed from my experience in the game, I was suddenly struck from behind and bowled right over.

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t see you down there, hahahaha!” I could hear a deep and booming voice say, as I was staring at the ground, getting my bearings back. Shaking my head, I stood back up and saw a massive male Clawfolk in heavy plate armour, holding a giant two-headed axe over his right shoulder and his helmet under his left arm. Next to him was a slightly smaller, but no less imposing, female [dog person], wearing chainmail over what looked to be leather armour, with a sword and tower shield that were both larger than I was strapped to her back. Just as a guess, I’d say that the Clawfolk was about three times my height, and the [dogfolk] was about twice my height. Behind the two of them, Adelwin was holding his sister back, as she fumed and said some choice words.

“Sorry to be in your way,” I said, stepping over to the side, as they walked past.

“Hmph, good to see that you know your place. Can’t believe they’re letting just anyone take the test,” the Clawfolk said.

“That’s what the test is for, dear,” responded the [dogfolk]. “They’ll weed out those who don’t belong long before they can get in.”

As they walked off, I pulled out my scripting tome, released the anti-gravity script on myself, and started writing targeting glyphs for one of the scripts within the tome. Just as I was finishing up, Adelais runs up behind me, with her brother close behind.

“You just going to let them get away with that, Lalalie?!” she asked.

“Of course not. Aaaaaaaaand... done!”

With that, I stamped the sealing rune on the script and fed it my aether. Suddenly, there was a loud clatter as the two assholes found that all of their equipment now weighed 10 times as much as it used to, pinning them to the ground.

“I’m still a long ways behind what Lalalie was able to do, but after our training session I at least made sure to review what he had left in his tome. It looked like he specialized in gravity

manipulation, and I can tell it'll be very useful.”

“Heh, you know, he would have done the same thing,” Adelais laughed, as we walked past the two jerks lying in a heap, struggling to move.

“You picked it up faster than I expected you to, Lalalie. That was more complicated than we had practiced yesterday,” said Adelwin.

“Yeah, but... I don't know, it seems like after reviewing Lalalie's work, something got shaken loose overnight. The system now feels very familiar, like something I used to work with in my old life. But I'm rusty, for sure. There's a few scripts in this book that I can only understand fragments of.”

“Well, we can work on this together. I was always interested in Lalalie's work, but he was also very secretive about what he put in that book.” Adelwin looked at the tome in my hands, clearly excited to explore its depths.

“Alright, you two. Let's get through this test first, alright?” Adelais came up behind the two of us and put her arms around our shoulders, with a great big smile on her face. “We can worry about everything else once we're Lightbringers, ok?”

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up, which both of them looked a little confused at, but I decided to not give it any mind for the moment. We were finally in line, which was moving through the registration at a pretty good pace, and soon enough we were all directed to different tellers in order to confirm details from our registration forms. I ended up being directed to T'Gria, while the twins each got a different teller.

“Good to see you back,” he said as I came up to the window and pulled out the step-stool.

“Thanks for your help the other day, by the way,” I replied. “So, what do you need from me?”

“Nothing much, just need you to put your hand on this aethertech scanner for me, while I confirm that we have your details right.” With that, T'Gria motioned to a black half-sphere with pulsing red lines zig-zagging all over the surface of it, mounted in a square base that was just to his left. I had seen devices like this in the game, as some manner of McGuffin needed to operate old magical technology. I put my right hand on the sphere as directed, and the lines changed to a light blue color and the pulsing turned to a more scanner-like wave across the surface. Kind of like there was now a ring of light, rotating around the outer edge along the length of my hand. While this was happening, T'Gria was pushing buttons on a display that was on his right.

“Strength, durability, reactions, aether manipulation, aether absorption, all potentials A rank. Huh. Don't see that often,” he mused, writing the results down on another form.

“Potentials? What is this scanning, by the way?” I asked, trying to get a better look at the display for myself.

“Oh, this device estimates your potential in a number of characteristics. It can't give us specifics, or even tell us where you are right now, but it is able to give a good idea of where you should focus your efforts. It doesn't mean that you can't become an expert at something you have a low potential at, though. We have a lot of Lightbringers in our ranks that buck their potential and are still high ranked. It just means they need to work harder at it, or think outside of the box. Still, most people only have one or two A or S rank potentials. Alright, that should do it. Please wait in the next room. You will be summoned when it is your turn.”

T'Gria finished filling out the form, attached it to my registration alongside another piece of paper, and then fed the bundle into another aethertech device that glowed for a moment. I waved my thanks to him, and walked past the open door into what looked to be a waiting room. A

number of other applicants were milling about, and a number were sitting on various benches that were placed around. I saw that the twins were already here, and walked over and sat down on one of the benches next to them. After I ask the twins if they know what the test involves, Adelais shook her head. “I was hoping you had an idea, kinda.”

“Gonna be honest, this is actually new to me. The, uh, visions I had before had this step go completely differently.”

In the game, after arriving in Utani, the player ends up getting wrapped up in a sequence of events that ends with them getting invited into the Lightbringers after they rescue the [head of state] from kidnappers. It made me wonder if this was happening in the background while we were sitting here. Not the kidnapping (yet), but meeting up with the Lightbringer agent who eventually leads the player on the daring rescue. Maybe if we had taken a different route when we arrived in the city, we’d be off on an adventure already?

While I was pondering this, Adelwin leaned over and tapped me on the shoulder. “Hey, do you notice something strange going on around here?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“Strange? Uh.” I replied, starting to look around the room. It seemed that people were still steadily filtering into the room, some taking seats and some wandering around looking at the various decorations on display. We were about halfway through the pack when we finally registered, and looking at the number of people in the room compared to the number I saw outside, I guessed... wait.

“... There’s fewer people in here than there should be,” I whispered back. “I’ve seen this kind of thing before. It seems like the test has already begun. What did the staff say to you after confirming your details?”

“Uh, ‘Please wait in the next room. You will be summoned when it is your turn’, I think she said?” replied Adelais.

“Yeah, that’s what mine said to me,” confirmed Adelwin.

“Mmhmm, same here. You think this is a clue?”

I stood up and stretched my arms and back, using that as a cover as I looked around the room until I saw what I was looking for: A secluded corner of the room where a statue of the crystal of Hyzor was gently glowing.

“Be discrete, but watch me and follow once you see what happens,” I told them, and then I walked over to a painting of what seemed to be the castle at Tulpet, in the [Fire nation]. At that point, I finally released the gravity script I had been holding, and reapplied my anti-gravity because my back was starting to kill me.

Admiring the art as I slowly moved towards the statue, I heard not just the hum of concentrated aether as I got closer, but I also started to hear a commotion from outside the room. Just as I reached the statue, the door from the lobby burst open and a familiar voice yelled out “WHERE IS THAT RUNT?!” Knowing that this was certainly to get everyone’s attention, I took the opportunity from the distraction to grab the crystal and twist, and my vision went white.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Real Test

When my vision came back, it first looked like I was back in the same room, but as it got clearer I could see that there were a lot fewer people here than there had been. Also no giant Clawfolk screaming obscenities, though I could hear something muffled from the wall behind me that suggested that I had not traveled very far.

“Ah, I see you figured out the Aetherport puzzle as well,” a light male voice I recognized said from a nearby bench. Looking over, I was taken back for a moment because sitting there was a familiar fluffy [horsefolk] in an oversized brown trenchcoat, which only barely disguised the chainmail underneath it, with a crossed pair of short swords sheathed on the left hip. This serious-looking twin swordsman with a cute alpaca-like face and light bronze fur was none other than Chron Polus, one of the Lightbringer allies the player has during the game’s main story. Normally the player would meet with him later on in the campaign, as you started investigating the kidnapping plot, but I guess he was a more recent hire than the game made it seem. This was, actually, a fan theory within the community, as it had seemed that Chron was really trying to make a name for himself during that mission, leading folks to believe that he was new, despite his claims of being a seasoned adventurer. Though both things could still be true, looking at the easy way he held himself and his equipment.

“Oh, sorry, did I spook you? Sorry about that miss. The name’s Chron Polus. What’s yours?” I guess he took my silence to be shock, so I shook my head and walked towards him.

“Lalalie Lily. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said while giving a short curtsy.

“Oh please. No need for formalities here. But Lily, huh. Any relation to Momolie Lily?” he replied, standing up for a moment before he realized the difference in our heights (roughly double mine) and sat back down and offered his hand for a shake. While Chron had a very fuzzy alpaca-like look, he had human-like hands (mostly all fur-covered, except for the pad and fingertips, kind of like a cat), and equine-like legs with hooves. Combined with his human-length neck but tall alpaca ears, he cuts a silly figure, which quickly earned him a top spot in fan rankings, despite the writers trying to make him one of the serious members of the player character’s Lightbringer group.

“Oh, are you familiar with my mother’s work?” I asked, a little surprised at this possibility, as I grasped his hand and shook it firmly.

“Ah, mostly a hobby, you might say.” Chron was also firm in his shake, and we both let go.

“I don’t know if I would call research into [Jaiku gave a good term] a hobby, myself. Then again, I guess my mother did at first,” I laughed for a moment, before I got taken back again with the realization that I should not have known any of that information. The player character’s

parents never come up in the story, let alone what they did in their lives. A lot of players took this opportunity to craft their own backstories, which is probably what the developers intended, but I never bothered to think about it, myself.

“Haha, I guess you’re right. I just have an interest in advanced aether mechanics, you might say,” Chron responded, seemingly not noticing my reaction, as he leaned back on the bench. “So, you want to become a Lightbringer, then?”

“Indeed. I don’t think I could ever catch up to my mother, and I wanted to help people like my father did. And since the knights rarely take Planesfolk, I figured the Lightbringers would be my next best option.” I moved over to the side of Chron opposite from the teleporter and sat down on the bench. There was space left next to me for the twins to take, once they finally arrived.

“Ha, you’re right there. Those dumb knights are too focused on raw strength, and overlook the things that other races could bring to the table.” A voice from the other end of the room yelled out in displeasure at Chron’s characterization of the Utani Knights, but he ignored the outburst. It was at that moment that I heard the hum of aether again, and a flash of light signaled the arrival of the twins.

“Shattered crystals you got out of there at the right time, Lalaie,” said Adelais, after a moment. I figured that the twins also had the same kind of disorientation that I did when they were transported over, because she was shaking her head and Adelwin was hunched over looking like he was about to hurl. “Still, an Aetherport? That’s a pretty fancy way to hide one’s real test site.”

“Uuuuggghhh, why...” groaned Adelwin, as his sister led him towards me and the bench.

“Your friend going to be ok?” Chron asked towards me, as he was sat down. Adelais shrugged, “Yeah, probably. ‘win’s always been sensitive to turbulent aether, but neither of us have had the opportunity to use an Aetherport before this. I figure he’ll bounce back in a moment. Anyway, I’m Adelais Dravenport, and this heaving pile here is my twin brother Adelwin.”

Adelwin was still too sick to respond.

“Chron Polus, the pleasure is mine,” Chron responded, also offering his hand for a shake, which Adelais accepted. “So, I take it then that this is your first time?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “We had decided to join together once I turned 20, and have spent the last few years honing our skills for this day.”

“How about you, Chron? You got any tips for a group of newbies?” asked Adelais, glancing around the room. I also looked around, and could tell that we had no more than a quarter of the applicants in here.

“I don’t know, I feel like if you made it here, there’s nothing more that I need to say,” Chron replied, looking up in thought as he brushed the fur along his neck. “After all, the next step is...”

Right then, Chron was interrupted by the door opening with a loud bang, and in floated a small (smaller than even me) [spiritfolk]. Sometimes called “spirits”, “fairies”, or “fae”, [spiritfolk] were, according to one of the lorebooks, the descendants of an ancient civilization that had tried to avoid a cataclysm by building an aethertech machine that converted them into pure aether. It didn’t quite work as they had planned, however, causing them to be jumbled around in the flow of aether around the world for about a thousand years until they were able to redevelop enough “will” to form bodies. Since controlling pure aether in this manner is not easy, [spiritfolk] are generally even smaller than Planesfolk and don’t tend to leave the enclaves they

have built in aether-dense regions of the world. Because their bodies are just made of aether, they can change their looks to suit their mood and tastes, but could still hold or wear physical items if they wanted to. As well, since they were essentially bodyless “spirits”, they gave up on the concept of a sexual binary, though ones who left the enclaves to live in the larger world more permanently frequently found a pronoun that felt right to them, if nothing else then to make interacting with “solids” easier.

Relatedly, [spiritfolk] can have children with other races, though the union tends to just result in the children being the same race as their non-[spiritfolk] parent, but with higher aether control and/or capacity. Very rarely, the child develops enough aether control to shed their physical form and become a [spiritfolk]. As well, since the [spiritfolk] don’t really have physical bodies, their partner needs to be a woman in order for the pair to conceive. One of Momolie’s mothers was a [spiritfolk]... which is another piece of knowledge that I shouldn’t have. Though it was one I liked knowing. I made a note to visit after I became a Lightbringer.

This [spiritfolk] was dressed in a sharp-looking white suit, with white gloves, white ankle boots, and a white belt that had a number of places that likely held wands, but were currently empty. Long black hair floated around their head, almost like a bundle of snakes, but never covered up their face, no matter how they moved their head. Speaking of, their androgynous face was a pale rose colour, highlighted by deep crimson eyes that lacked irises, giving them a very otherworldly vibe.

The room went silent when the door banged open, as everyone stopped to stare at the person who floated in. “Huh, only eight figured it out this time?” they said, with a slightly higher pitch, not quite feminine yet not quite NOT masculine voice. “Well, that works out anyway.”

They then floated a little further into the room, giving space for another two people to enter. One was a hulking Rockfolk in heavy black armour, their face covered by a closed helmet (but leaving their horns exposed), with a large axe on their back. The other was a lithe male [catfolk] in a light red robe with gold trims and embroidery that accentuated his short golden-blond hair, carrying a staff with a crystal orb adorning the top.

After the two of them finished walking in and flanking the [spiritfolk], they clapped their hands together. “Welcome, everyone! You have all managed to get past the first phase of the recruitment assessment. My name is Critsasa Siera, and I’m the Head Lightbringer of this branch. On my left,” she gestures to the Rockfolk, “is Black Mountain, and on my right,” gesturing to the [catfolk] now, “is W’Ger Nii’el.

“Now, you may be wondering what the point of this was. Well, the Lightbringers do more than just fight monsters and brigands. We also get called up to do reconnaissance and investigative work as well, so we need people who can think more then we need people who can fight.”

I nodded my head at this. In the game, as a member of the Lightbringers, the player ended up fighting a lot of monsters and the like, sure. But they also were a force of stability, helping people of all walks of life from finding lost items to solving crimes. It was a common joke among the players that the Sword in the Darkness was basically an errand boy (or girl, or non-binary) for anyone they came across, saving cats from trees in between defeating world-ending threats.

“Now, at this point we used to have this whole big to-do where we’d throw you applicants into a series of combat trials, either against each other or against monsters, but quite frankly that doesn’t really tell us anything about whether a person makes for a good Lightbringer or not. So,

instead, we're going to split you into two teams..."

Critsasa waved their right arm over the room, and people started glowing either red or blue. In fact, Chron, Adelais, Adelwin, and I were all glowing blue, as was Black Mountain, while everyone else other than Critsasa was glowing red.

"Yep, that looks right. Ok everyone, so, what'll happen is that each team will be given an official Lightbringer mission, and you'll complete it with your assigned proctor overseeing," explained Critsasa. "The proctor is only there to make sure you don't get in over your head, that the mission is completed successfully, and to assess each of you individually and as a team. They will not participate in the mission unless necessary, otherwise leaving all aspects of it to you all to accomplish on your own."

Critsasa waved their arm again and the glow faded. "I'll leave you to your proctors now. Oh, and in case you were wondering, the people who didn't figure out this puzzle didn't fail outright, but they do have to go through a more..." they paused for a moment, putting a finger to their cheek as if they were thinking, "...rigorous screening process before we give them this same task. Well, that's enough for me. Ta ta~."

With that, Critsasa gave a spin and a bow, and then floated out of the room. Black Mountain and W'Ger both walked to opposite ends of the room, giving everyone enough space that we didn't need to be talking over each other. I got up off of the bench and moved over to where Black Mountain went.

By the way, the name "Black Mountain" was very apt. I know that my father is large, but Black Mountain seemed even taller than him; easily 3 times my height and then some. I got a brief image of the Clawfolk we ran into outside, but Black Mountain had more calm to their imposing presence, as they stood on their side of the room, arms crossed as they waited for us to gather.

Once we were all on the side of the room with Black Mountain, they uncrossed their arms and took their helmet off revealing a person that I can only describe as a gyaru.

CHAPTER NINE

Excerpts from Lalalie's Diary

The Final Day

Today is the day.

The dreams about the man have been getting longer and longer over the past week, concluding last night with what seemed to be his entire day, ending with him using that "computer" and slumping over after seeing Hyzor's crystal. I didn't need to be directly told to know that this was my time. It was convenient how it coincided with our departure from Dendrobium Springs. I'm sure that Hyzor had a hand in this, somehow.

I made sure my bags were packed with more supplies than I would normally need, to make sure that he would be capable of making due until he settles in. I even packed a couple of outfits that I had seen he liked, despite my displeasure for them. Never did know why I kept those. They were a gift from my grandmother, sure, but that was no obligation. I must have been influenced to keep them around.

As I write this, we're in the carriage heading through the Gapsara Woodlands. We normally wouldn't have taken this route in order to get to [the capital], but I had already seen how this will happen, and I knew I needed to be here. Besides, I hope that the route being a little longer will help him some.

The twins know that this will happen someday, but I didn't have the heart to tell them this morning what I had seen. I had only just finished accepting that I would never see my parents again. I wanted their last memories of "me" to be happy.

I finish up this entry as the twins are having a nap in the carriage. They apparently were up late with excitement for the journey. The weather is pleasant today, so I think I will join them.

To you who comes after me, [may you ever walk in the light of the crystal].

Applied Scripting

[Date]

Today I went to the capital in order to pick up my bra order. I can't believe we

pay so much to have these custom made, and yet they still don't provide enough support. Considering the range of everyday magic that is applied to clothing these days, they still don't have one for this? What the heck do Rockfolk ladies do, then?

Hm, my scripting tutor comes tomorrow. Maybe I'll ask about it while he's here. But really, it didn't seem like the ladies on either side of my family were unusually sized, but then again I don't think I've seen any Rockfolk mixed-bloods. I wonder if that is where it comes from. Just an awkward combination of my mother's height and my aunts' width? Regardless I hate it. I hope that this person who will be coming in the future appreciates all this.

[Date+1]

Asked Teach about my problem, and while he didn't have any examples of glyphs that could do what I was thinking of, we did end up spending the session on how to use targeting glyphs to only target specific body parts. Turned out that this was way harder than it seemed; the glyphs are very good at being able to target an area or target a creature, but targeting an area on a creature, especially as it is moving, is actually very complicated.

I practiced with some very basic strength enhancement scripts, and by the end of the day I was able to make only one arm or leg stronger, instead of my whole body. This does allow for more augmentation in the specific location, but the targeting is less efficient so it ends up burning more aether in the same period of time. I'll have to show this one to Adelais, I think she would be interested in finding a way to put more power behind her sword arm.

[Date+2]

While I was helping Adelais convert the script to [evoked] magic, Adelwin came by and was talking of an interesting book on glyphs he had found at the library. It was a tome on theoretical siege magic, and talked about how glyphs could be used to make siege weapons heavier or lighter as necessary, in order to make them easier to move around the battlefield. Adelwin was interested in trying out some of the glyphs he saw in the book to see if it was possible to make areas of heavier or lighter gravity, which could be used to slow down or disorient foes. I, however, had another idea in mind, and asked if I could see the book when he was done with it.

[Date+5]

Adelwin gave me the book on theoretical siege magic today, and I spent most of it since then studying the glyphs in it. The theory was a little over my head, but the glyph itself was surprisingly easy to duplicate. However, that didn't mean it was easy to put into practice. I could tell that it needed to be fed targeting in a different way than I was used to, and it didn't seem to be directly compatible with the scripts Teach and I worked on last week.

Well, Teach will be back tomorrow, so I'll talk to him about it then.

[Date+6]

I finally did it!

It turned out that the gravity glyph used an input method that Teach was going to cover in a few weeks anyway, so we decided to move up the lesson. There's no real difference between what the two input methods end up doing, it was instead between conflicting schools of glyph research. He had been teaching me Antilian scripting methods, but this book was written using Broznian ones instead.

That's pretty annoying. Why can't they just have one unified method?

Anyway, once we were able to feed targeting into the glyph, it turned out that basic gravity control was actually really easy, though the strength of the effect is surprisingly sensitive. After spending the end of the lesson on practicing making things in an area heavier or lighter, Teach

gave me some extra homework and took off for his next student. And here I thought I was already giving myself enough extra credit...

After he left, I converted the targeting script I had already written to the Broznian method, and after plugging it into the gravity glyph and some fine-tuning, I was able to take a huge weight off of my chest. The aether drain is higher than I expected, though. I've only been running the script for a few hours now and I'm exhausted. I will need to do more experimentation to see if I can make it more efficient. I may have also made the gravity reduction effect too great, as well. I'll apologize to Adelwin later... Still, it's wild how targeting alone was about 80% of the script.

Well, with that, I'm going to go to bed and have a good sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Passages That May Not Be Used

“Well, I guess that since the missing person has come back, this case is closed?” Chron asked.

Adelais looked unhappy. “I don’t feel great about leaving it like this. Something stinks.”

“But what do you think we can do about it?” replied Adelwin. “The missing person came back and says they just got lost. Even a passive lie detecting script didn’t find fault with that statement.”

Meanwhile, I was deep in thought. This scenario was very similar to a main story quest chain that the player has early on, but we shouldn’t have seen it just yet, nor was it involving this person. But the similarities were so striking that it had to be the same.

“... That [person] is under a goose.” I finally said.

Everyone looked at me with a blank expression for a moment.

“What did you just say?” asked Adelais.

“I said that [pronoun] is under a goose.” I crossed my arms and looked up at her.

“A what.” She now tilted her head at me, like I was crazy.

“A goose?” Having a suspicion that I knew what the problem was, I started to flail a little. “A geese? A gee ass? How do you pronounce it? That thing where a person must act in accordance with a magically imposed condition?”

“Oh, you mean a geas,” Adelwin said.

“Wait, is that how it’s pronounced?” I kind of had never really heard anyone actually pronounce it. I just remember it being the name of a popular show, and even then I think it wasn’t spelt correctly. So as a joke I just always used goose instead. The twins were shaking their heads at me.

“What makes you think that, Lalalie?” Chron asked. A fair question, too, as [pronoun] certainly didn’t act like anything was out of the ordinary. As I started to get concerned about how I was going to explain this, Adelais threw me a lifeline and asked if it was another vision.

“Yeah... I saw [pronoun] in some kind of cave, surrounded by a fiery inferno, while people in robes cast some manner of spell...” I tried to be vague, describing what had happened to the NPC that the player was searching for. On top of that, I even knew where the cave was, but no one would believe me if I said so right now. There’s no evidence yet. I could only hope that this was enough to let us keep investigating further.

“Eeeeh. That’s pretty thin there,” Chron said. Which was also fair. After all, this wasn’t much better. “I’m not sure we can justify anything further on what might as well be a hunch. Not that I don’t believe in visions, but we need more than this.”

If I didn't know better, I'd have said that Chron was giving me a look like he knew a lot more than he was letting on.

Adelwin then spoke up, breaking an awkward silence. "In that case, then, let us return to the Guild and submit our reports and go from there, shall we? If nothing else, another Lightbringer can build off of what we have discovered."

"Yeah, alright..." Adelais was clearly unhappy, but her brother was right. We had almost less than nothing. Unless we could figure out how the geas worked, we would not even be able to detect it, let alone dispel it. And [person] didn't think anything was wrong, so [pronoun] had nothing more to give us.