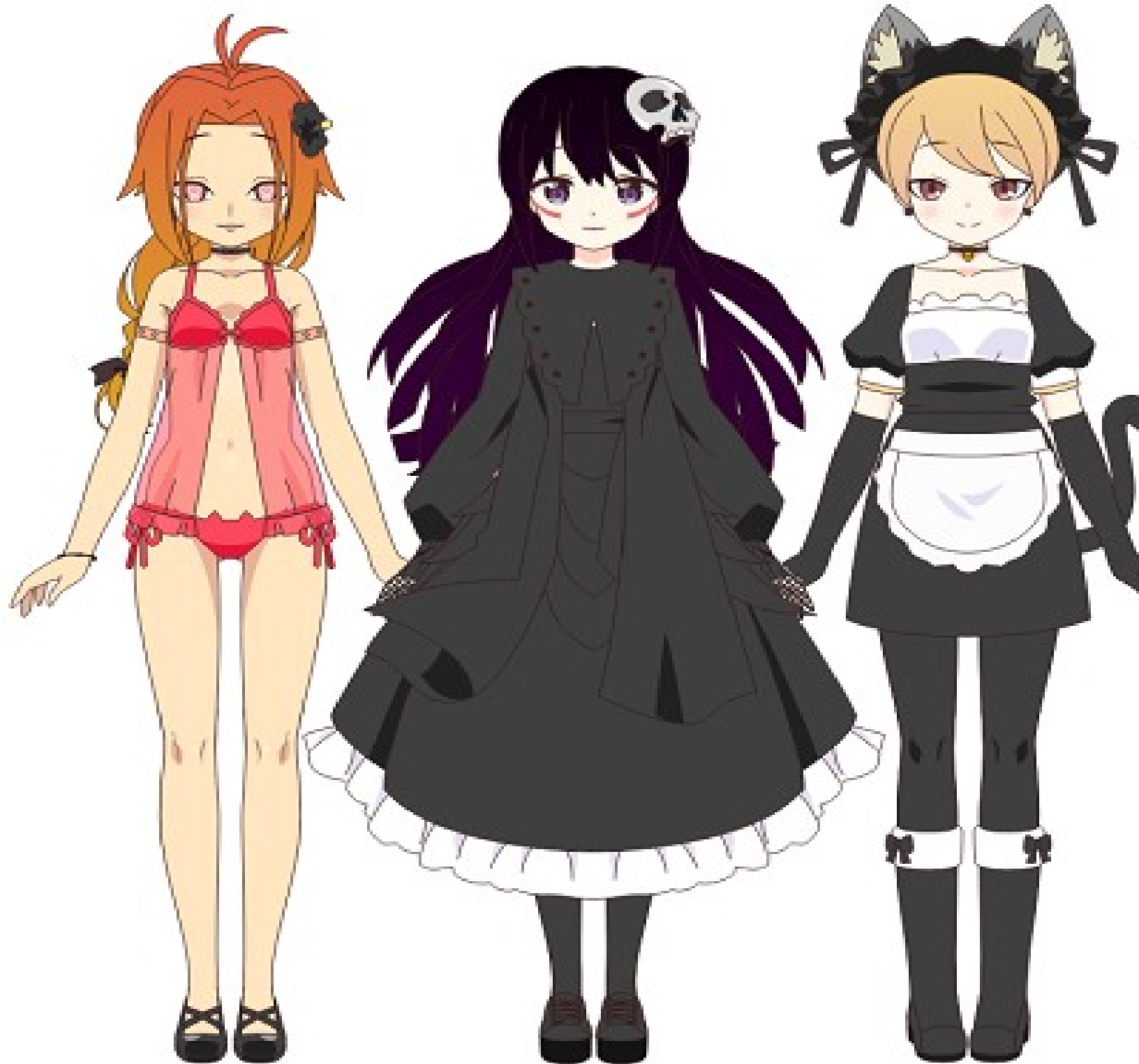


# A Friendly Voidling



## Part 1

In the depths of the Void, crushing silence reigned. Calling it dark wouldn't be accurate. 'Dark' was comparative; it implied the existence of light. There was no light here. Neither were there sounds or smells. There was no matter at all. The Void was a sea of nothingness, infinite and eternal. And yet, even here, life found a way. The Creatures of the Void, flexible in form and without purpose, drifting aimlessly in the silence. Denizens of other planes feared the Creatures of the Void, considering them destructive, mindless monstrosities, that if summoned would do nothing but rampage, consume and destroy. This was unfair. If one of those judgemental denizens were cast into outer space, or underwater, or, indeed, into the Void, they would probably flail around in confusion for a bit too. It wasn't the fault of the Creatures that they were larger than average, and that an aimless swing of an appendage could destroy an average city from the more mundane planes. Mages should stop trying to drop them into environments for which they were completely unsuited.

While the Void was largely homogenous, it wasn't completely so. There was, after all, only one section of the Void that had *her* in it.

*"HEY! HEY! DO YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH ME? HOW ABOUT TAG? NO? ARE YOU IGNORING ME? WHY ARE YOU IGNORING ME? COME ON, DON'T BE BORING!"*

Her latest victim flicked its collection of a dozen fish tails, darting away from the psychic noise of its tormentor. She huffed. Not an actual huff, of course, because there was no air, but it was the thought that counted. She could huff psychically with the best of them. Why was everyone so unfriendly? Why did everyone try to avoid her? Just because she didn't want to spend her life drifting around uselessly like the rest of the boring old fogies. She wanted to *do* something. To *be* something. And, most of all, to make *friends*.

Meanwhile, in the city of Glimmerhome, a robed figure was muttering to himself while drawing on the floor with a viscous red liquid that one might hope, incorrectly, was paint. "No place in modern mage-craft for human sacrifice, is there? It's frowned upon to create additional opportunities for promotion by poisoning superiors, is it? Well, if they want to destroy the time-honoured traditions of our university, then I'll just have to express my disagreement using those very same time-honoured traditions. Let's see how they like that!"

It's often claimed that talking to oneself is a sign of insanity. This is also unfair; many perfectly sane people talk to themselves. It's often a useful way to put thoughts into order, or work through difficult problems. However, in this particular case, assuming insanity would have been accurate. The university in question was in fact the Institute of Inadvisable Incantations, and insanity was more or less an entry requirement. If anyone sane had entered, they might have questioned why the big, thick gate set into the ten metre high wall that surrounded the whole campus had its lock on the *outside*. It wouldn't have taken much effort to spot that it had been built to keep things in, and not out. Not that many people on the inside would mind, even if they did notice. After all, with its own taverns, theatres, buffets and small but dedicated branch of the assassins' guild, why would anyone need to leave?

The mage completed the creation of his sigil, and began to chant an incantation that was incredibly ill-advised indeed. The time-honoured tradition in question? If you're losing at a game, knock over the table. Sure, in this case the table was a building big enough to fit thousands, but the principle was the same. The mage cackled as he drew upon the Void, calling forth a Creature. Little did he know the horror he was about to unleash. He merely wanted to destroy the university and slaughter everyone in it, and maybe the city outside too if they were unlucky and the Creature was one of the bigger ones. He didn't intend to subject them to *her*. That was going *far* too far, even by his mad standards.

The Creature sailed through the Void, having taken on her preferred travel form, looking for new friends. Her current shape would be best described as a fractal eel. From a distance, and if there were any light here, it would have the appearance of a fairly normal eel, if only because the lack of perspective here in the Void prevented any comprehension of the immense size. Viewed more closely, one would spot that the eel was in fact made of eels, which were in turn formed of smaller eels. It was eels all the way down. There was no particular reason for this. She just liked the shape of eels, and the way they slithered.

She felt the change as the power of another plane reached into the Void. She felt the opening, only a few thousand kilometres away. She'd heard about this, back before the other Creatures had learnt to flee from her immediately on detection. Beings from other planes would try to summon Creatures from the Void from time to time, for no apparent reason. The summoners always seemed to die immediately afterwards, so the Creatures had never found out what it was that they actually wanted. Maybe they wanted to be friends? She propelled herself towards the distortion, hopeful that she would be the one to finally find out what these strange otherworldly beings were after.

She wasn't an idiot, and she knew the other side of this portal would be very different from here. Otherworldly beings were small and fragile, right? So she should make herself small too, to match. She didn't know what the beings on the other side would look like, so she decided to stick with her eel shape. Shrunken down to the tiny length of only a hundred metres, she proceeded through the opening and into the unknown.

A five metre square basement somewhere below the university suddenly contained a hundred metres of eldritch eel. It took a brief moment for the laws of geometry to work out that this was impossible, after which the building rearranged itself to compensate, in a rather explosive manner. She cursed, realising that she'd still got

the scale wrong, and folded herself down further. Somewhere less than two metres seemed about right, judging from the flailing monkey shaped things falling out of the sky between the chunks of brickwork. Size suitably adjusted, she spread out her perception around herself. Another one of the strange monkey things was quite close to her, in the same room she had been summoned in to. Was this the summoner? Did this one actually survive? She reached out to it with her mind.

*"HELLO? DO YOU WANT TO BE MY FRIEND?"*

Unfortunately, it wasn't just her size that she had scaled incorrectly. The poor mage's tiny human brain responded to the full force of a Creature's psychic communication in much the same way that the basement had responded to her body. She felt the splatter of brain matter impact on her side.

*"IS THAT A NO THEN? ARE YOU IGNORING ME TOO?"*

There was no response. She pondered. Maybe this weird monkey thing couldn't hear her, and these otherworldly beings had some other method of communication? She probed at the body, but as far as she could tell, it didn't have any sense organs at all. Maybe they were in that extra round bit at the top that had exploded? She extended a tendril and snatched up one of the falling ones, and examined the head carefully. Eyes and ears? And an arrangement of strings and fleshy bits that generated sound from moving air? That would be easy enough to replicate. And since the only living things around here seemed to be monkey shaped, she should take that form too, so as to better fit in and increase her friend-making potential.

She adjusted her form to look like one of the hairless monkeys, pausing briefly to ponder why she seemed to have a couple of extra lumps in places where her examples did not. They did have *something* there. Maybe it was natural variation, and theirs were just

small? Conversely, she seemed to be missing a bit lower down that they did have. How strange... She blamed quantum. Most inexplicable things could be blamed on quantum, in her experience.

Switching on her new eyes and ears, the first thing she heard was the screaming. It seemed to be coming from all around. Was this how these alien beings communicated? But there didn't seem to be much complexity in the noises, and the organs she'd probed should be capable of dealing with far more intricate sounds. The specimen she'd grabbed from mid air had stopped wriggling, so perhaps she could ask it? But how? She screamed a bit, but it didn't respond. She grew a few extra tentacles and poked at it, but it didn't respond to that either. *Was everything* going to just ignore her? Well, these bags of flesh seemed to have some sort of internal organ that did their thinking for them. It didn't seem overly complicated, so she would just have to inspect it herself. She withdrew the tentacles that were still inserted into its lungs, where they had been completely blocking its airways, and thrust them up its nose and into the brain instead.

Ah, so these two monkey things, or 'humans' as they called themselves, weren't ignoring her. Apparently they were suffering from the condition she knew as 'death'. That was... inconvenient. Still, judging from the continued screaming, there were plenty more of these humans around who might want to be her friend.

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In his palace in the centre of the city, a safe distance away from the Institute of Inadvisable Incantations, the Abode of Aberrant Alchemy, the Shed That Explodes On Tuesdays For No Apparent Reason, and all the other structures that were designed primarily for ease of reconstruction, the mayor looked through his window at the plume of smoke in the distance. He sighed in resignation and jingled a little bell on his desk.

"Yes, master?"

The mayor did his best to suppress his nervous twitch as the voice sounded behind him. The servant came with the job, like the skull and unicorn wallpaper, but he'd never get used to his complete disregard for societal norms. For example, the tradition that moving from room to room should involve doorways at some point.

"How many casualties?"

"Outside of the Ill, only one. An unfortunate impact from a particularly ballistic brick, that pieced a window and impacted a gentleman as he was taking a bath."

"Excellent. Not the worst explosion of the week, then. Do we know what caused it? Anything to be concerned about?"

"Eyewitnesses reported the brief appearance of a giant eel. It vanished shortly afterwards, and the wall remains unbreached. There appears to be no cause for concern."

The mayor refrained from asking how his servant had questioned eyewitnesses in the twenty seconds between the explosion and him ringing the bell. He'd learnt early on in the job that asking that sort of question merely resulted in headaches. Unfortunately, despite his efficiency, the servant was not infallible. Thus the mayor remained blissfully unaware of the horror that had entered his city.

## **Part 2**

Simon was having a bad day. It had started innocuously enough, with just a bit of spilt coffee causing a mild burn. Then there had been the scorpion in his shoe, no doubt placed there by an over-ambitious junior researcher, or possibly some pranksome student. Then his research notes had caught fire, but since the topic of his research was spontaneous combustion, that was acceptable. Then the building had exploded, which wasn't, and had spoilt his schedule for the whole day. And now he found himself standing before a

Creature of the Void, an Eldritch Horror, an Incarnation of Chaos and Death, and, even worse, a *girl*.

"Hi. Will you be my friend?"

Simon took a moment to process the request and decided he had insufficient information. Research would have to be conducted before he could give a definitive answer. He started with the obvious. "Why are you naked?"

The Creature looked down and inspected its body. "Hmm, yes, that brain I ate did contain something about nakedness being socially unacceptable."

The Creature was suddenly wearing an exact clone of Simon's research robes. Given that they were fitted for a male, and that Simon was quite slender to begin with, this resulted in considerable tightness across the chest, in a way that somehow emphasised its presence even more than the nakedness. Simon found certain passions that he thought he had long put behind him suddenly inflamed, but even so, they still needed to take a back seat to further research. For example, the next obvious question. "You ate someone's *brain*?!"

"Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. But now I'm getting the impression that eating brains is not socially acceptable either. Why is making friends so hard?"

Simon considered the brief glimpse he'd had of an eel made of eels in the middle of the explosion, and put two and two together. However, he'd been brought up to be polite, and a mere eldritch horror standing in front of him wasn't going to destroy decades of ingrained behaviour. "I'm very sorry, my lady, but I don't believe I can be your friend."

Social niceties respected, he could now get on with what he really wanted to do. Simon turned and fled, screaming his head off.



The Creature huffed, an action that was far more satisfying now that she had lungs, as well as an atmosphere to utilise them in. At least that human had been nice about it, and she'd managed to hold the whole conversation without accidentally killing anyone. That was progress, of a sort. She decided to work through the rest of the memories she'd obtained before making another attempt, to avoid a future misstep, such as her nakedness. Alas, as has already been mentioned, insanity was practically a requirement for working at the Ill, making the local brain supply unsuited for this task. Taking in the conflicting and nonsensical information, the only conclusion she could make was that perhaps her friend making attempts would be more fruitful elsewhere.

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Grant the gate guard muttered under his breath. This job was usually easy; no-one outside wanted to enter and no-one inside wanted to leave, so all he needed to do was stand there looking official, and hope to high heavens that he wasn't struck with the need to piss halfway through his shift. Today would be different. There would be builders and materials entering all day to aid in reconstruction, and probably mages wanting to head out to visit the nearby taverns now that their own internal facilities had been flattened again. His supervisor had already supplied him with the day's list of excuses as to why those taverns, while open to the mages if they *really* wanted to visit, would nevertheless be an inferior option to remaining inside the wall. Gentle persuasion was the key; it was important to keep the mages thinking that not leaving was their own choice.

There was a knock from the inside of the gate. Grant sighed, and settled on answer number three to deal with this one; pointing out that the barmaids outside the wall were, well, *maids*. Females were not something these mages were used to dealing with, and their presence tended to be off-putting. He slid open the window panel and peered at the would-be escapee.

Well, option three was out. This resident was obviously very intimately acquainted with females indeed, being one herself. Maybe option two?

"Hi. Would you mind opening the gate, please? I want to make some friends, but everyone in here keeps screaming at me and running away, so I thought maybe I should try outside."

Not option two either, then. There were dozens of prepared responses for a mage wanting to obtain alcohol, buzz, schmuck, or any one of a number of other mind-altering substances, but he wasn't aware of any for someone wanting to obtain friends. That was a new one. His mind spun desperately, but regulations were quite clear. The mages weren't prisoners, and given the failure of the prepared excuses, he had to let them out. And then immediately report the event to the captain, who would quietly make Arrangements. Grant hadn't been told what those Arrangements would entail, and after seeing the capitalisation he had decided he didn't *want* to know, but the important thing was that it would no longer be his problem.

The gate ground open, and the Creature stepped out, with Grant having no clue at all about what he had just unleashed upon the city. Not that he should feel any guilt even if he did; it wasn't as if Grant's permission was required for the Creature to step through the gate. Or jump over the wall. Or erase the wall. She had merely worked out that jumping over ten metre walls or destroying things was socially unacceptable, and may impact her ability to make friends, so she'd decided to try and be polite first. She looked at grant, noting that his armour looked quite different from the robes favoured on the inside of the gate. "Do you want to be my friend?"

"Sorry, but I'm working. I need to go and see my captain now."

"Aww."

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The Creature wandered along a street, taking in the expansive shopfronts, the perfectly laid cobblestones and the exquisitely dressed pedestrians. This was all so... *colourful*. She wasn't used to colour. Seeing the world through eyes was so different from her usual perception. Such small, squishy, delicate things, and yet capable of such beauty. Unfortunately, her admiration of the general existence of reality was disrupted by an arrow piercing her back. Not unfortunate for *her*, as such, just unfortunate in general. Even the complete destruction of her physical body wouldn't phase her, so an arrow stood no chance. She didn't even *notice* the deadly poison it had been smeared with.

She sighed, an action that turned out to be quite difficult with an arrow running through her lung, so it came out as more of a gurgle. She looked down at the arrowhead poking out of her chest, grabbed it and pulled it the rest of the way through, then undid the damage. Then sighed again, happy that this attempt went better. This was the third time in the last half hour this had happened. How come everyone back in that big circular wall screamed at her so much when she wasn't even doing anything, but they would walk down a street that seemed to rain arrows at random without so much as batting an eyelid? It occurred to the Creature that all three had struck her, while none had fallen elsewhere. Perhaps they *weren't* random? This required investigation.

Grant and Simon had thought they were having bad days. They may even have been correct, objectively speaking, but compared to the assassin tasked with taking out the Ill escapee, their days were very mild indeed. He certainly had a name, but since he's obviously not going to be living much longer, there will be no point in learning it. The Creature lashed out with a tendril, grasping his ankle and yanking him from his hiding place on the rooftop. He ended up upside-down right in front of her face. She glared at him, such as someone may glare at a naughty dog who has just diddled on their carpet. "That was dangerous! You could kill someone!"

The assassin blinked in astonishment. Yes, of course he could kill someone. That was kind of the *point*. On the other hand, he felt that saying that out loud to the apparently invulnerable women in the too small robes would be a terminally bad idea. Bereft of other ideas, he decided to play along. "Sorry, I didn't see you there. It won't happen again, so could you please put me down?"

The Creature pondered. It would have been a plausible excuse had it been just the one arrow, but three times was pushing it. "I think you're lying," she frowned. "I think you did it deliberately."

The assassin cursed to himself. Here he was, held prisoner by apparently the most naive and gullible target imaginable, and yet he could tell from the strength in the tendril that bound him that she would need barely a thought to snap him clean in two. Why hadn't he just run away after the first couple of shots failed? Why did he think a third type of poison would have any more effect? Well, she had almost believed the 'it was an accident' excuse, so he'd have to go all in on that. "I was testing a new type of arrow, but they're attracted by large sources of magic," he lied. "Apparently you kept sucking them in."

The Creature looked at the arrow that was still in her hand. It didn't seem to be magical in any way, but she had to admit she wasn't an expert, despite her cerebral lunch. Ah well, it would be easy enough to check. "I'm going to see if you're telling the truth. Please stay still, or I might accidentally break you."

The assassin whimpered as tendrils invaded his ears and nose, while the Creature cutely tilted her head. "You liar! You were trying to kill me! That wasn't very friendly!"

The lifeless corpse of the assassin dropped to the ground, his skull now rather emptier than a few seconds prior. Something else that was emptier was the street. The Creature looked around, wondering where everyone had gone. Come to think of it, there had been quite

a lot of screaming going on while she was dealing with the naughty arrow man. Damn it. How hard was it to just *talk* to someone?

Taking a few more steps down the street, she took in a large sign on a store-front advertising itself as the Marketplace of Affection. The shock was enough that she almost lost control of her form. She could *buy* friends? After a quick probe of her latest meal to find out how money worked, she deprived the assassin's corpse of its coins and valuables, on the basis that he didn't need them any more, and joyfully bounded towards the store. If only she had probed a bit further, she would have found out that the assassin had been a regular visitor to the establishment in question himself, and it wasn't *quite* the place that the Creature thought it was.

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"Excuse me, master."

Having his servant turn up behind him was bad enough when he had summoned him himself. When he popped up on his own like that... The mayor jerked violently and fell out of his seat, a painful bang sounding out at around the halfway point. "Ouch, my *knee*! How many times do I have to tell you to stop doing that?! You'll give me a heart attack one of these days!"

"Sorry, master. I came bearing news of this morning's incident. Regretfully, it was worse than first believed."

The mayor rubbed his knee as he climbed back onto his chair. He knew it was useless; however many apologies he received, the servant would never change. At least he never popped up on his own like that unless something was actually important. Of course, the corollary to that was that whatever had happened at the Ill was *actually important*. That was bad, in a way that wouldn't be measured in something as trivial as the casualty count. "Go ahead. What disaster are we facing this time?"

"Apparently a disgruntled mage summoned a Creature from the Void."

"Again? Well, that explains the giant eel. At least this one went back quickly. So what's the emergency?"

"That's the thing, master. It didn't go back. It assumed human form, and then, umm..."

The mayor froze. His servant had just *ummed*. He *never* ummed, or showed any sign of uncertainty.

"Umm... It... left, master."

"Left? You just said it didn't go home."

"Indeed, it did not. It left the Ill. It knocked on the gate, waited for the guard to open it, and then walked out. It said it was going to make *friends*. There have already been a number of casualties."

The mayor maintained his silence. The words all there, and they fitted together nicely into a comprehensible and semantically correct sentence, but the whole concept made less sense than a chocolate teapot. A Creature of the Void wanted to make *friends*? In *his* city? He opened his mouth, but lacking the words to convey the utter absurdity of the situation, he was forced to close it again.

"Would you like to give the order to evacuate the city, master?"

"Where to?" he snapped. "It's not as if we have a spare continent!"

### **Part 3**

Jill was having a great day. She had them, from time to time, those customers who weren't actually interested in sex, but just wanted someone to lend a compassionate ear. That the ear was attached to an erotically dressed beauty was just an added bonus. Sure, this one

was a bit weird, but she'd paid with a diamond. An actual *diamond*. Given the size, she would be able to sell it for what she normally made in a *month*. For that much money, Jill decided she could tolerate a lot of weirdness.

"But then it turned out he was lying, and he was actually trying to kill me, so I ate his brain."

Yes, *very* weird. But Jill wasn't trying to kill this... Lady? Girl? Her age seemed rather indeterminate, but she did have a youthful air about her. Girl was probably appropriate. Whatever; the important point was that, from her story, aside from a few early accidents, she'd only killed people who deserved it, which Jill didn't. So even if the girl wasn't making all this up as she went along and she really was some sort of insanely powerful cannibalistic warrior, Jill was safe. Hopefully. She eyed the diamond again, reminding herself that she was being properly compensated for this. Okay, maybe calling it a great day had been premature. It was *potentially* a great day. She just needed to survive it first.

"I'm sorry to hear that, and I'm glad to see you survived."

"Well, it's not as if this is my real body in the first place, so it wouldn't matter even if it got completely destroyed. But it's still rude."

Jill nodded along, letting the strange girl unload her pent-up frustrations. It went on for some time, but again, *diamond*. If she wanted Jill's entire day, she could damn well have it. Once the unloading finished, the girl switched to a different sort of weird.

"So, since I paid you, does that mean we're friends now?"

Jill, relieved that she appeared in no immediate danger of sudden death, answered happily, "that's not quite how this works, but sure, why not? Ah, you haven't told me your name yet. My name is Jill, by the way."

"Oh, my goodness," the Creature gasped. "How could I forget to give my own name? I'm sorry, I've not quite got this social etiquette thing down yet. I only learnt what 'etiquette' was a few hours ago. My name is..."

Now, at this point it should be remembered that the Creature's name has not yet been mentioned in this tale. This is for good reason. The Creatures did, of course, have names, but they were not mere words. They were entire conceptions, that described all that the Creature was, all that it has been and all that it may yet be. Spoken only in the psychic language of the Void, there was no way to translate them into the lesser speech of mortals, although, if we were to try, perhaps a minute section taken from the middle of her name could be rendered as 'she-who-is-very-very-annoying-and-sort-of-clumsy'. And we all remember what happened the last time she used the psychic language of the Void on a squishy human.

"...but you wouldn't be able to pronounce that, so how about you call me Anya instead? Hello? You've gone all quiet? Is there something wrong with 'Anya'? Hello?"

Jill was slumped over on her bed, head tilted at an odd angle, with a thin thread of drool hanging from her mouth and a stream of blood oozing from her nose. It was the blood that gave the self-proclaimed Anya the clue that something had gone wrong. The brains she'd eaten didn't all agree on much, but one thing that was a constant was that when everything was working normally, the blood should be on the inside. Except in the case of human sacrifice, but Anya was fairly certain that particular exception did not apply here.

"Oh no! Did I break you? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. It's okay, I can fix this!"

Anya stuffed some of her body mass into Jill's nasal cavity. Fortunately, Anya was no fool; she was simply inexperienced in the affairs of mortals. She had noted the effect her native speech had on



her summoner, and for Jill's sake had toned down the volume this time. It wasn't her fault that the single data point was insufficient, and as a result she hadn't toned it down by enough. She had, however, reduced the volume sufficiently that Jill's head was still structurally intact, and it was no difficult task to find the bits of brain that were a little more mushy than was natural and solidify them. Jill twitched.

"Whurppleglurb"

Anya pondered. She hadn't seen this brain before it partially melted, so there was a bit of guesswork involved in putting it back together, but it should have been fairly close. Nevertheless, that didn't sound quite right. She could use bits of the mage or assassin brains, but they were all male, and what if there was some difference? She needed to inspect a female brain. Just taking one without permission would be rude, sure, but Jill was her friend, and friends took precedence over strangers. She ran out of the room and barged into the one next door. It was occupied by... was that two people, or just one? There were two heads, but they seemed to be connected below the waist. They also weren't wearing clothes, but maybe that's because they wouldn't fit given the strange body shape? Well, one half of the body had the lumps that indicated female, so that brain would do. Even better, if this person had a spare, Anya didn't have to feel too bad about taking it without permission. In too much of a hurry to be neat about it, Anya ripped the female head off and deconstructed it whole. The male head started screaming, but it would just have to make do. Anya ran back out to Jill, who for some reason had picked up the diamond and started licking it, and resumed the operation.

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As has been previously hinted, the city of Glimmerhome was not a safe location. Assassins stalked the rooftops with impunity, mad mages treated collateral damage as an unfortunate necessity of their research, priests who saw it as their divine duty to get as many people into heaven as quickly as possible poisoned the water supply

on a regular basis, and, of course, there were the daily explosions. That meant that when the city's nobility started quietly sidling off away to their countryside homes or family in other countries or, in one extreme case of a particular famous wizarding family, relocating their whole mansion to another plane of existence entirely, everyone knew that something was *very* wrong. Glimmerhome had withstood sieges, plagues, famine, and even that time when the Abode of Aberrant Alchemy had made that horrible smell, the one that had rolled over the whole city in a great purple cloud and had seeped in *everywhere*. To be fleeing now, what exactly had happened?

There was nothing as crass as an evacuation order. People just decided, completely independently and without prompting, that *right now* was the perfect time for a seaside holiday, or to visit foreign relatives, or to run down the main street screaming and waving 'the end is nigh' placards.

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Anya took a step back and inspected her handiwork. Jill looked fine from the outside, apart from the one eye that had started flashing, but that was fine; it was doing so in the gamma-ray range, which was well outside of what these primitive human eyes could perceive, so no-one would notice. Hopefully the insides were just as good.

"Hello? Jill? Can you hear me? Are you feeling better now?"

Jill jerked, then spun around to stare at Anya. "No no no, this won't do at all! How can I let any friend of mine wear such an unfashionable outfit?"

Anya beamed. Jill had called her her friend! After countless aeons, she had finally made her first one! And all she'd had to do for it was a bit of reconstructive brain surgery. She should have done this *ages* ago. As for her outfit, coverage was the important point. The memories she'd consumed had informed her of the existence of this so called 'fashion', but the rules seemed to have no self-consistency

at all, so she'd decided to ignore them. She was vaguely aware that these robes weren't something a female should wear, but why not? A robe was basically a dress, and dresses were something that *men* shouldn't wear, so why the difference? But if her new friend was prepared to help her navigate this quagmire that made even less sense than quantum, she wasn't about to say no.

Without waiting for an answer, Jill picked up the diamond in one hand, took Anya's hand in the other, and marched out of the room and down the stairs. Normally the madam would have had something to say about her girls leaving the premises during work hours, but for some reason she wasn't at the reception desk. Jill caught a brief glimpse of her through the open doorway to her office, standing atop a bulging suitcase and trying to tie it shut. Weird.

The streets were rather emptier than was usual for the time of the day, but neither Anya nor Jill were in any state to notice that fact; Anya because she didn't know what was normal to start with, and Jill because she'd just had her brain inexpertly melted and rebuilt. They meandered casually down the street, avoiding the surprising number of people running in the opposite direction and shouting at all who would listen to flee for their lives, until Jill reached her favourite clothing store.

"Huh? That's odd. This store is always doing great business, so why is it having a closing down sale? Well, whatever. Cheaper clothes for us!"

Jill happily bounced inside, wondering whether she should pick up a few new things herself, and if the store would have enough cash on hand to change the diamond. The proprietor was immediately in front of them, having moved from behind the counter apparently without bothering with the intervening space.

"You have cash?"

Jill blinked. "I have this?" She held out the diamond.

The diamond was suddenly no longer in her hand. "It'll do. Thank you for your purchase."

"Wait, I haven't even said what I want yet!"

"Doesn't matter. You can have all of it. I've left the deeds on the counter."

Jill watched the proprietor... umm... ex-proprietor as he danced out of the store and down the street while cackling manically.

"Do you think there's something going on in the city that we don't know about? Everyone is acting *very* odd."

Anya shrugged, enjoying the discovery of yet another interesting expression should could make with this monkey body. "I don't know what constitutes 'odd' in the first place."

Jill blinked as realisation dawned. "Oi, he took my diamond!"

Anya shrugged again. She had no idea what the fascination with jewels was. Especially diamonds; they were nothing more than boring lumps of carbon. At least some of the others had interesting chemical compositions. She could make more of any of them easily enough. If her new friend wanted diamonds, then diamonds she would have. "Here, have some more."

Jill looked down at her hand, as the diamonds spilled out of it and onto the floor. Right, she decided, this Anya was her new best friend for life. She was never going to let her out of her sight. And speaking of sight, why did everything she looked at start glowing green after a while? Today was just one weird thing after another. And apparently they owned a *shop* now. She wasn't entirely sure which of them it belonged to, or if they should share, but right now that didn't seem important. She flipped over the 'open' sign on the front door and locked it. "Right, let's get you dressed."

## Part 4

On a plateau some distance from the city, the general of the Rudellian army eyed the tall, sturdy walls of Glimmerhome. The war between the Rudellians and the Politellians had been ongoing for so long that no-one could remember what it was even about, and it had turned into something of a sport. This year it was the Rudellians' turn to attack, and they were damn well going to make it count. They'd had a great defensive season the previous year, and if they pulled ahead here, their lead could become insurmountable. Glimmerhome had been chosen as the target not out of any strategic considerations, but simply because the chief royal court mage was determined to finally solve the mystery of the Shed That Explodes On Tuesdays For No Apparent Reason. It was a poor excuse for attacking a city, but there was an advantage to being unpredictable, so he hadn't argued against it. His adjunct, peering through binoculars, commented, "I don't see any guards. The walls are completely empty, the gates are wide open and unmanned, and I can't see *anyone*."

The general pondered. What sort of trickery was this? He respected his opponents in the great game of war, and acknowledged their mastery. This was obviously some sort of trap, but *where*? Should he march the army in? Should he send scouts? Should they ignore the invitation entirely, and lay siege to the city? He applauded their fascinating and unconventional manoeuvre, which had made him doubt himself with no expenditure of manpower on their part whatsoever. "We will lay siege to the city as planned. Only once the encirclement is complete will we risk any scouts."

---

Anya inspected herself in the mirror. She was currently wearing a heavy, black gothic lolita style dress. To her it seemed rather impractical, but apparently it was 'fashionable'. Anya was even more confused about what fashion was now than when she'd started, having been dressed up in everything from ballgowns and trouser-

suits to baby-dolls and exposed lingerie. There had been the maid outfit, in serious blacks and whites, the dress down to her ankles and with an accompanying cute, frilly headpiece. There had been the sexy nurse outfit, which was far too short, and hadn't seemed suitable for any clinical setting. There had been the cat ears, paws, tail and collar, which hadn't even covered any of the parts that clothing was supposed to cover, and had a *really* unusual, yet oddly pleasant, method of attaching the tail. That one had made Jill squeal in delight and turn so red that Anya was worried she had broken again.

"Oh my goodness, that *dress*. I don't know why, but it just matches you so well. It speaks to what you *are*."

Jill blinked. Why had she just said that? Anya was perfectly human, wasn't she? Well, whatever. She had a willing and beautiful dress up doll, and an entire store worth of clothes to play with. And then a few she'd need to retry once she was done. She blushed again at the thought of sexy kitty Anya, and wondered if they could return to the Marketplace of Affection with that outfit.

"Excuse me, mistress."

Anya and Jill both jumped, Anya reacting in the traditional Creature way by decapitating the sudden intruder with a freshly sprouted tendril. Drat, now she'd made a hole in the dress. She quickly went about repairing it, in case it made Jill hate her.

"My apologies, but I seem to have inadvertently become decapitated. If you would be so kind, would you please place my head back upon my body, mistress?"

Jill, not one to jump to conclusions, checked the front door. It was still closed and locked. She checked the rear door. It was equally closed and locked. So were the windows. "Before I reattach your head, who the hell are you, and how did you get in here?"

The head looked hurt. "I am but your lowly servant, mistress. And I simply entered the room."

"Why are you calling me mistress?"

"Because you are my mistress, mistress."

"I'm pretty sure I don't own any... any... whatever you are."

Anya, done with her repairs, poked at the collapsed and motionless body, this time using a more socially appropriate finger. "How interesting. It appears to be some sort of golem."

"Indeed, my lady. And of course you are my mistress, mistress, for you are the city mayor."

"I'm... pretty sure I'm not. I would have remembered something like that."

"The previous mayor resigned. There are many rules and regulations to deal with such a case, but here they were all rendered moot by the fact that you were the only eligible citizen remaining."

"What? There's a hundred thousand people here. How can I be the only one eligible?"

"They all fled the city, mistress."

A rather startled Jill took another look out of the window. The street outside did indeed have a deserted air about it. "What, *everyone*? They can't have, I mean, Anya is still right over there, for a start."

"I believe that she is what they were fleeing *from*, mistress."

Jill considered this. It was true that Anya could be a little bit scary, and had a tendency to sprout tentacles with rather more regularity than most people she'd met, but she wasn't *that* bad. At heart, she was just a sweet little girl, not to mention sexy as hell. But since

everyone had run away, didn't that mean that her and Anya had the whole city to themselves? Apart from this golem, but with his head detached he shouldn't be able to get in the way. An inappropriate giggle escaped her lips. "Well, thank you for bringing this to my attention, but since the city is abandoned, why don't I put your head back on and then you can take the rest of the day off?"

"My apologies again, mistress, but you seem to have misunderstood. I did not come here to inform you of your appointment as city mayor. That happened some time ago. I came to request your orders as to how to deal with the Rudellian invasion."

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Outside the city, the Rudellian general stood in his command tent. The encirclement was complete, yet there still hadn't been a single response from the city. The walls remained empty and the gates remained open. This was... suspicious. Was this really some cunning strategy from the Politellians? Or had something happened that had required the city to be evacuated, or that had killed everyone within? It seemed unlikely. Glimmerhome was a rather tough nut, and anything bad enough to crack it should have been noticeable half a continent away.

His adjunct stuck his head into the tent. "The scouts have returned, sir. They report the city completely empty, with signs of a rushed evacuation. No evidence of what caused the evacuation, thus far."

The general frowned. He knew where he stood with warfare. It was all about arranging matters such that his men managed to jab sharpened lumps of metal into the enemy before they managed to do the reverse. Sure, there was plenty of strategy involved, and sometimes even subterfuge, but at least there was an obvious end goal. Now he had a mystery on his hands, and he did not enjoy mysteries at all. They could claim this as a victory and go marching into the empty city only for whatever triggered the evacuation to wipe out his whole army. Conversely, they could sit out here for weeks



besieging a completely empty city. Either option would make him a laughing stock. He couldn't just turn around and go home either, for the same reason. Maybe they should just pick a different city to assault, and pretend this never happened?

A sudden commotion from outside interrupted his thoughts. Secretly glad of the distraction, he headed towards the exit of the tent to see what was up, but by the time he got there, the noises had gathered a noticeable screaming component. An attack? From where? Had this been a ruse all along? He threw aside the tent flap and found himself standing before two young girls. One was wearing a full-bodied black dress that looked like it contained an entire warehouse worth of lace, and had more skirts than he'd had glorious victories. The other wasn't wearing much at all, leaving nothing whatsoever up to the imagination, and with a piercing gaze that felt like it was burning straight through him. Then he noticed some other details, like the way the black-dressed one was holding the head of his adjunct, which had some sort of tendril stuck into its ear. Looking around, he saw the body of his adjunct laying on the ground. And over there, next to the wood pile. And was that one of his legs he saw over there on top of that tent? And that pile of red, bleeding mush over there would account for the earlier screaming, perhaps? He promptly turned around and threw up.

"So, that's the general of the invading army? Is he ill?"

"It seems that he is, or at least this guy thought he was. Thought he was the general, that is, not that he thought he was ill."

"Right, so... what do we do now? Ask him nicely to go home?"

"I guess so? I mean, if they're invading, they probably don't want to be friends, do they?"

The general had seen many horrible sights during the war, but somehow the sight of these two young girls standing in the middle of the remains of his army, chatting away as if they were taking a

casual walk in a park, breached all of his defences. He staggered back around towards the intruders.

"Who... Who are you?" He again glanced at the scattered piles of flesh, where the rivulets of blood tracing through the camp were finally starting to run dry. "*What* are you?"

"Right, introductions. I'm Jill, the mayor of Glimmerhome, and this is my best friend Anya. And we'd really appreciate it if you'd stop trying to invade."

Anya sprouted a big, dopy smile, staring blissfully at Jill with eyes glazed over. That introduction by Jill had been something of a tactical error, the upgrade from 'friend' to 'best friend' having caused several important parts of Anya's mind to crash. Fortunately, with the besieging army all dead and/or eaten, there was no-one left to take advantage.

"Mayor? You're dressed like a whore!"

"Oi, language! I'm a proper courtesan, thank you very much. Or was. I suppose the madam fled with the rest of them. Does that mean I own the place now?"

"Ooo, now my friend owns a shop where I can buy more friends? Why didn't I come to this world earlier?!"

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that... I think you've got the wrong idea about our establishment."

The poor general was completely lost here, and could feel his grip on reality steadily slipping. This can't be real, right? This is some illusion? Some plot from the Politellians? "Umm... Excuse me, but could you please maybe explain what's going on?"

It has often been claimed that simply viewing a Creature of the Void is enough to rob anyone of their sanity. This is yet another unfair

superstition. It's true that trying to view one who's wearing a non-euclidean form can be dangerous, but no more so than viewing anything else that can't possibly exist in the given universe. Again, that wasn't their fault; it was the fault of the mages who kept summoning them to completely alien planes of existence and expecting them to immediately fit in, despite not giving them any prior warning of what the local fundamental laws of physics were. But right now, the form that Anya was wearing was a hundred percent humanoid. Well, maybe ninety percent, given the occasional tentacle. The point being, while she did indeed have a tendency to inflict insanity on all who saw her, it had purely regular rather than mystical causes.

"Right. As I said, we came to ask you politely to go home. We don't want to be invaded today."

Once again, the general's eyes were drawn to his surroundings.  
"That was *polite*?"

"They didn't want to let us see you. Then they started getting rather rude, and Anya had to tell them off."

Suddenly, running home seemed like a much better idea, ridicule be damned. "Very well. Since you do not wish to partake in our invasion today, we'll... I mean, *I'll* be off." The general gave a bow, grabbed a horse and some supplies, and rode away into the distance while gibbering madly.

Jill flopped to the ground, putting just enough care into the action to avoid landing in anything icky. "Thank goodness that's over. This mayor thing is hard! I'm glad I have you with me, or goodness knows what those nasty men would have done with me. Did you hear some of those comments they were making?"

"I thought they sounded very complementary? The way they tried to grab us wasn't very nice though."

"Complementary? That's... You really have no idea at all, do you? Right, as soon as we get back to town, I'm giving you an education."

## Part 5

In the audience chamber of the royal palace, the former mayor of Glimmerhome stood before the king.

"...and so that is why we abandoned Glimmerhome."

The king nodded; he probably would have run away too. There was just one problem. "So, what do you intend to do when *it* follows you?"

"*Follows me?*"

"You said *it* was seeking friends. With Glimmerhome empty, *it* will naturally have to look further afield."

"Oh... Ah... Umm..."

Much to his relief, the former mayor was rescued from his stammering by the entrance of a soldier.

"Sire, we have just received a message from the Rudellians. They are forfeiting the remainder of their offensive season, following our spectacular defence of Glimmerhome, in which their entire army was defeated by the city mayor and a single warrior. They applaud our play and offer their congratulations on us taking the lead."

The king peered at the former mayor. "I would say that congratulations are in order, but I feel that if you'd defeated an entire army on your way out, you would have mentioned it."

"Yes, regrettably, I have no idea what that message is about. But, if there were only one registered citizen remaining in the city, I believe

they would become mayor by default. Maybe *it* successfully found a friend after all?"

The king considered the thought of someone with a Creature of the Void at their beck and call and, after shuddering for the appropriate amount of time, called over to the soldier. "Please take a message back to the Rudellians. We would like to propose an alliance."

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Anya stumbled into a bathroom within the Market of Affection. She had, after Jill had explained one or two things about the real purpose of the establishment, taken the effort to create for herself a more accurate faximile of a human body, and let it start doing some of the automatic things that it seemed to want to do. She'd even gone as far as to start using the fleshy brain to think with, which was a profoundly odd experience. It kept trying to go off and do its own thing, despite Anya's efforts to keep it on track, and that was without the whole issue of hormones. Why did a few simple chemicals make her feel so *different*? At least it had reduced the frequency of accidental tentacles, and it wasn't as if she couldn't give up the body any time she liked. Yes, any time. Probably. Hopefully.

On the downside, that meant she suddenly had to deal with stupid, pointless things like breathing and eating. And *poo*. How ridiculous was *poo*? Why did these creatures expel precious mass? Why not just convert it to energy? Instead, they relied on hopelessly inefficient chemical processes. It was such a waste.

On the upside, ohmygosh! How had she lived for so long without ever finding out about *sex*?! Apparently it was supposed to be done between one male and one female, but Jill had brought out several interesting devices that had happily solved that issue. *Very* happily. Anya had never been *sore* before, but it had been so worth it. Actually, that brought back to mind the women whose head she had ripped off... Oops; it hadn't been any sort of two-headed creature

after all. Ah well, too late to do anything about it now. She'd just have to apologise if she saw the man again.

She gently lowered herself into the steaming hot bath, the magic that powered it still running smoothly despite the city's abandonment. Jill staggered in shortly afterwards, utterly naked and bow legged. "That... That thing you did... The one with the eels. You *have* to teach me that."

That amount of speech having exhausted her currently limited mental capacity, Jill slumped into the bath too. She was starting to suspect that, despite previous assumptions, Anya was not actually completely human. She was used to her more perverted magically-blessed clients summoning tentacles, but eels were a new one.

The two lay there in silence, recovering from their exertions. At least until they were distracted by a loud bang, the windows rattling as the shock-wave passed. Jill barely twitched. "Wow, is it Tuesday already? I'd completely lost track of time."

She dipped back in to thoughtful silence, before speaking up again. "You know, I've always wanted to explore, to get out and see the world a bit. With the city abandoned, something important is sure to explode at some point, so we can't stay here forever. We should go on a journey, just the two of us."

Anya pushed herself marginally more upright. "Aren't you this city's ruler? Is it okay for you to just leave?"

"I don't see why not. The last mayor did."

Anya considered that and saw no flaw in the argument. Besides, it would be interesting to wander around this alien world for a bit with her new friend. "Fair enough."

Dragging themselves out of the bath and into their clothes, the two of them started gathering necessities. It was kind of the previous

inhabitants to leave them so much stuff, and Anya started filling out her pockets with food, clothing, tools and other gear. She even remembered to pack up Jill's interesting collection of devices, for later enjoyment. Jill watched on with incredulity as thirty centimetres of silicone vanished into a pocket that couldn't have been more than ten centimetres in depth. She lifted up Anya's skirts, but no, there was nothing under there either. Where was it all going?

"How are you doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"You've just packed an entire store worth of clothing into one pocket."

"Yes?"

The two stared at each other in mutual incomprehension, until Anya realised her mistake. "Oh, is that not normal? Sorry, another thing to add to my list. How do you carry all your belongings with you when you move around then?"

"Umm... Normally, we don't. That's why everyone left so much stuff behind when they ran away."

"Oh... Should I put it all back?"

"Nah, keep it. That's a useful trick."

Anya shrugged, and continued packing away several stores' worth of goods, while Jill watched on. Since she didn't seem to have anything to do, she turned her mind to other matters. It has been said by philosophers that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, which is a rather sweeping generalisation given the many different *types* of knowledge, but the statement does have at least some truth to it. In this case, Jill possessed the knowledge that she was, however unwilfully, the city's mayor, and that mayors had at least some

responsibility. She also knew that there was one more being within the city who, while not strictly a citizen, at least had a good head on his shoulders. She knew *that* fact well, because she'd helped Anya to put it back after it had, umm... *accidentally* fallen off. Therefore, rather than just running away, she should carry out her duty properly.

She was also was curious about one or two things, so rather than summoning him there and then, she returned to the bathroom, locked the door, then carefully inspected the room. Finding nothing untoward, she stood with her back to the bath. "Servant?"

"Yes, mistress?"

She turned to see the servant standing waist deep in the pool. There hadn't been a splash, nor was it overflowing.

"I would complain that's impossible, but I've just watched Anya pack away a ten-person tent into a pocket of her dress without even bothering to dismantle it first. Anyway, we're leaving the city, so I was planning to appoint a new mayor."

"Mayors aren't permitted to directly appoint their successor, mistress."

"I know, there has to be an election. But I am the only eligible voter, am I not? Therefore, if I declare an election to begin in ten seconds, last another ten, to be conducted orally and with you to adjudicate, that's all perfectly legal, correct?"

The servant considered that and had to agree it was true. "Very well, mistress. I declare this election open."

"Good. I vote for you."

"Umm..."



"Look, with us two gone, you'll be the only one left in the city, citizen or not. You seem sensible and dedicated, so you should do a great job. Thanks."

"Umm..."

Ignoring the golem, Jill turned and left. Of course he was dedicated; he was a golem! But he was definitely *not* sensible; again, golem! There was no fundamental requirement that a golem had to serve a master, but it was nevertheless a very good idea, and such a master should also be very careful as to what instructions they give. In this case, the vital knowledge that Jill was lacking included such things as the fate of the drowned city of Bonedry, in the centre of the Rainless Desert, where some golems had been instructed to carry as much water as possible into the city. Or the active volcano over to the east, created when someone had told a golem to dig a hole and had forgotten to tell it to stop, getting a mighty surprise once it hit the mantle. Or the fate of the ancient lost continent of Foooh, where the people had decided to make a golem their ruler to avoid all the annoying power struggles and wars and such, and the first thing the golem had done was to decide that the biggest threat to the country was its people. This golem, finally processing what had just happened, resumed his movement and set out to do what was *best* for the city.

Fortunately, by that point Jill and Anya had already reached a safe distance.

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An encirclement of hundreds of the continent's best mages, Rudellian and Politellian alike, surrounded the city of Glimmerhome. No-one was even trying to kill each other, for the most part. There was, of course, still a small amount of background stabbing going on, because there's always a few who think they're above obeying orders, especially among the arrogant upper echelons of magehood. Nevertheless, on the whole, things were going well, and the

greatest banishment circle the world had ever seen was slowly taking shape around the city. Killing the Creature was well beyond the ability of even this gathering, assuming it could be killed at all. Likewise, any attempt to contain or seal it would be doomed to failure. Banishing it back to the Void, though, should be barely within their power. It was their best and only option. The sigils engraved into the dirt hummed with power, and the entire construction roared to life.

It was a truly impressive piece of magecraft, of a level seen once a century at most, the raw power washing over the whole city being visible even to the naked eye. Anya would have been impressed, had she been around to see it. She wasn't able to witness it, however, on account of already being halfway to the next city over, a fact which the celebrating pair of kings would have greatly preferred to have known beforehand.

On the bright side, the spell wasn't completely wasted. When the following Tuesday came around, all was quiet, without a single explosion disturbing the peace. On the downside, it had caused the city's *new* new mayor to identify both major powers as enemies.

## **Part 6**

Jill and Anya ambled down the road towards the seaside city of Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port. The name was a bit of a mouthful, but a previous king had ruled that all settlements must have unique names, and thus the normal strategy of calling every other port town Newport was off the table. Alas, that ruling hadn't magically granted those bureaucrats responsible for naming every other port town Newport any additional creativity, and so they had followed the letter of the law without quite grasping its spirit.

The pair were in no rush at all, given that Anya had packed several years worth of food and, having decided that the tent didn't have a sufficiently large or comfortable bed, a full two-story house that

they'd picked up in an intervening town. The look on the realtor's face when Anya had handed over a fist full of diamonds, then casually picked the house up and tucked it into her dress was priceless. Then Jill had made the mistake of explaining that they were also paying for the land the house was built on, at which Anya had picked up and stored *that* too, an act which had left the town rather geometrically confused. Jill felt guilty about that for all of ten seconds, before realising what a great tourist attraction it would make. They'd soon be attracting mathematicians from the other side of the planet.

As they rounded a corner, they found the road ahead blocked by a fallen tree trunk. Jill sighed as Anya stepped off the road to walk around it, and grabbed the neckline of her dress to stop her.

"Urk!"

"Sorry, but here's another bit of education for you. Note how the tree is perpendicular across the road, and how the end is flat and cleanly cut. Taken together, these suggest that it was placed deliberately to block the road. Also note the group of rugged looking men leering at us while drawing various weapons, as well as the other groups coming out of hiding from the trees behind us. These are bandits."

The muscle-bound brute who appeared to be their leader, or at least the one who had the biggest leer, stepped forward. "Well well well, what do we have here? Two beautiful ladies, all on their own. And on *foot*, even. What say you come back with us? We'll give you a roof over your heads, and show you a good time."

Anya considered their offer. They seemed nice; not only were they complimentary, but they even seemed concerned for their welfare. But she already had several roofs in her pocket, and she was already having plenty of fun. Then again, more friends wouldn't hurt. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm already having a good time with Jill. Hopefully we can still be friends, though?"

The bandits fell silent in confusion, that response falling some distance away from their expectations. Jill just sighed, the response being easily predictable to her, or to anyone else who had known Anya for more than a minute. She spoke to the bandit leader. "Excuse me a second; she doesn't understand what you mean. You have to be direct with her."

Jill turned and started whispering to Anya, who shifted expression from smiling to confused, responding, "what's wrong with that? It sounds fun." Jill sighed again, and started whispering with slightly more urgency. Anya's face changed again as realisation dawned. "Oh, so they're bad people, like those soldiers from before?"

Jill beamed, stepping back and returning to normal volume. "Finally. Yes, they are."

Anya nodded. "Sorry, let's try that again. Thanks for the offer, but I'm already having a *good time* with Jill. And apparently you don't want to be friends and are going to attack us now?"

The bandits glanced around, aware that this wasn't going quite to plan. It wasn't so much the black-dressed one, who apparently had no idea what was going on, but rather the scantily clad one, who obviously did, yet who wasn't showing the slightest shred of the fear that would have been appropriate given the situation. The bandit leader shrugged. "Yes, I think we will be killing you now. As much as I'm sure you'd make us at a slave auction, I don't want to risk whatever you're infected with spreading to the rest of our merchandise."

Jill facepalmed. Some people were in far too much of a hurry to die. But from their talk about 'merchandise' it sounded like they'd kidnapped others. It would be easier to go there themselves than to explain the situation to the guards. Besides, she hadn't taught Anya the concept of capturing people alive yet, and there's no way a guard would believe the two of them without evidence. Maybe they would if

Anya got eldritch again, but she didn't want to accidentally end up ruling another city. "Can you eat one of them and extract the location of their hideout?"

"Hideout?"

"Base. Where they live. Wherever they're keeping their kidnap victims."

"Oh, okay."

That byplay didn't escape the notice of the charging bandits, who suddenly had second, third and fourth thoughts about their occupation, but unfortunately had too much momentum to abort. Jill closed her eyes, slowly counted to ten, then reopened them, doing her best to ignore the viscera now dangling from the nearby trees. "Well then, let's go rescue some damsels in distress."

---

It had taken the mayor an hour to bodge together his first golem. It didn't live up to his own high standards, but it was sufficient to build a third golem while the mayor built the second. After a second hour, four golems constructed numbers four to seven. A day's worth of hours later, and large parts of the town had been deconstructed for materials, but that was fine; golems didn't need housing or comforts. The exponentially increasing mass numbered over ten million, and with a workforce that large, some had been diverted to the construction of weapons. Battalions of golems armed with swords and pikes, more with bows, and yet others wielding deadly magical devices. There had even been a very short and messy attempt at cavalry, the mayor noting that his golem army weighed somewhat more than normal knights, and thus flesh and blood horses were unable to cope. He made a note to order the creation of some horse shaped golems, but for now, what he had was enough.

Across the plains, dozens of armies, each a hundred thousand golems strong, marched towards their missions. The safety of

Glimmerhome must be ensured by any means necessary. Arranging matters such that Glimmerhome was the only thing that existed in the world would be the logical first step towards that goal.

---

Keri was bored. It wasn't an emotion she'd expected to feel, having watched her guards be slaughtered by bandits, her trade caravan pillaged and burnt, herself tied up at sword-point and dragged into a dark, dank cave. She'd started off terrified, faced with the fear of imminent death, torture or defilement, but it had soon become clear that these bandits wanted her in optimal saleable condition. Her fate was to be sold on the black market, not to die here as the plaything of bandits. They'd even given her and the other captives plentiful food and water. Not that they'd been kind enough to untie their wrists; Keri had needed to shove her face into the bowl like some sort of animal.

The acute panic had given way to a sort of low-key, gut-wrenching fear. Her future looked bleak; even if some twist of fate led to her being rescued, her life savings had been invested in that caravan. She had nothing left. It would almost be better to be sold as a slave than to try to fit some sort of living back together from nothing, so long as she wasn't sold to anyone too sadistic. Most of the bandits had left to hunt new prey, and Keri was left imagining various horrible scenarios for the future. But that had been *hours* ago. She'd already been over every dark ending she could possibly imagine, multiple times. Now she wanted them to just hurry up and get back so she could find out which one was going to happen and get it over with.

Another hour later, and the guards that had been left behind were starting to look nervous. One of them in particular kept walking back and fore between his post and the cave entrance, looking out. Obviously something had gone wrong with the bandits' latest hunt. That didn't really suggest a likely rescue; if her own guards had fought off a bandit attack, she wouldn't then let them search the area for a hideout. The best case would be that they'd report the attack at

the next town, and soldiers or town guards would be dispatched, and probably wouldn't find this cave for days. The remaining bandits would move them long before then.

"It's not my fault. All these trees look the same!"

"I didn't say it was. You've done a great job. It's just that my feet hurt."

Sheesh, most of the bandits had been wiped out, or at least delayed by something, and now what sounded like two lost girls were about to walk straight into the lion's den of their own accord? She almost screamed a warning, but the bandits were already moving and the girls wouldn't outrun them even if they started fleeing now. There was no point causing problems for the bandits when it wouldn't achieve anything; they'd just get their revenge on her later.

"Do you want me to carry you? I could give you a piggyback?"

"No thanks. It's nice of you to offer, but I can see the cave over there. I can make it that far."

They knew the cave was here and were deliberately looking for it? Were they members of the bandit gang too? No, they can't be; the guards were on alert. They had no idea who these girls were. In fact, one of them was drawing a bow. Keri watched in resignation as he fired, feeling a pang of pity for the girls, whoever they were. Then there was a... squelch. A head rolled in front of Keri, a look of surprise frozen onto its face, and by some fluke its eyes meeting hers. The scream that Keri had pragmatically decided to hold in decided it had other plans, and made a bid for freedom. The decapitated corpse, still holding the bow, dropped slowly to the ground as gravity spotted it and fulfilled its obligation.

"This looks a bit different from the others I've seen. There's no green gunk dripping off it."

"Maybe that was poison? Wait, when did you... Ah, before coming to my store, right? You did mention it."

"Yeah. Why are there so many people who aren't nice?"

Keri watched a pair of young girls dawdle unconcernedly into the cave. One of the bandits won, in Keri's opinion, several awards for bravery by managing to stammer out, "who... who the hell are you? Where's the boss?"

The almost naked one completely ignored the bandits, her eyes fixed on the bandit leaders 'throne'. It was a rather sorry thing, basically just a plain wooden chair that various items of gold, or that were just gold-coloured, had been nailed to. It didn't even have a cushion. Nevertheless, to Jill's tired feet, it looked like pure bliss.

As she staggered towards it, flat out forgetting the bandits even existed, several of the unluckier ones took a swing at her with their various weapons. Keri watched the resulting bloodbath in morbid fascination. This couldn't possibly be real, she thought. I've broken and gone delirious. A human can't just be *dismantled* like that. Meat doesn't stick to the ceiling like that in reality. Young girls don't have that many tentacles.

Jill flopped onto the throne, heaving an almost orgasmic sigh as she took the weight off her feet. That lasted only a few seconds before she started shuffling.

"What the hell am I sitting on? What? *Why*? Who thought it would be a good idea to nail a *bowl* to the seat? How is this supposed to be comfortable?!"

One of the remaining bandits decided to make a break for it, managing two steps before his legs fell off. The remaining ones, those who had been too cowardly to move after watching the death of the bowman, or who had simply been fortunate enough to be standing too far away to join the attack, turned as one towards the



throne and knelt. One of them, the one who had already won bravery awards, managed to win another one.

"Welcome back home, boss."

Jill stared at him like he was something unpleasant stuck to the bottom of her shoe. "Don't you dare. We came here ourselves rather than fetching the professionals *because* I didn't want to accidentally end up ruling another city. I'm bloody well not going to let you spoil it by appointing me ruler of you sorry excuse for a bunch of bandits instead."

"Am I supposed to be killing them? You said there would be hostages here, so to only attack the people who attacked us, but you're talking like the rest of them are bandits too."

Jill glanced around the room, her eyes meeting Keri's for the first time. Then she looked over the rest of the 'merchandise', all bound on the floor. "Those poor girls over there are the hostages. All these kneeling guys pissing themselves over here are the bandits."

Anya nodded, and the bandits went away. Messily. Keri's brain, which was no longer bored in the slightest, decided that consciousness was overrated, and it would rather not have to witness any more of this, thank you very much. The last thing she managed before she slumped to the floor was to throw up, losing her lunch along with the remains of her sanity. Of all the dark futures she'd been imagining, this one had certainly not featured.

## **Part 7**

Fires raged across the breadbasket of the continent, a vast tract of fertile land that provided the bulk of the food of both kingdoms. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as *previously* fertile land. It had, in places, been scoured right down to the bedrock, and there weren't many crops that would grow directly in solid stone.

Golems didn't need to eat, after all, so they hadn't bothered to try to be tidy about it.

Several cities had fallen before anyone even realised what was happening, and by the time that they did, it was already too late. Not that it would have helped had they noticed sooner; it had already been too late before the first golem had stepped outside of Glimmerhome. There was no power on the continent able to field an army of ten million, and with each city that fell, the stone buildings were deconstructed to make even more.

The twin kingdoms of Rudellia and Politellia, the two main powers of the continent, had already fallen into disarray, being at the epicentre of the crisis and having already spent their magical resources in the attempt to banish Anya. The very same attempt that had triggered this attack in the first place. The irony was thick enough to taste, but alas not thick enough to impede the continued march of the golems, as they spread to all corners of the continent on their inexhaustible march.

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Keri stretched groggily. It had been a nice nap, and this was a very comfortable mattress she was laying on, but she couldn't quite recall why she'd been asleep. She sat upright and peered around at the room she was in. It was small, but quite homely, a log burning in a petite fireplace and a clock ticking away on the mantelpiece. There were even a few paintings hanging around. But despite the decoration, she couldn't place any of it. Hadn't she been driving her caravan, bringing wares to sell at Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port? She frowned as the memories started trickling back. They'd been attacked by bandits. The guards she'd hired had been slaughtered, and she herself had been captured, to be sold on the black market and fated to spend the rest of her life in slavery. She didn't remember being sold, but if this was where she'd ended up, things could have been worse. She struggled to her feet, but in

her daze managed to remain balanced for only a few seconds before toppling back over with a bang.

The door opened, and in stepped a woman who, despite her shortage of clothing, gave off an absolute air of being in charge. Keri was struck with a sudden feeling of terror, as if her life could be snuffed out at any moment. She couldn't quite remember why, but she knew she must absolutely never get on this person's bad side. She desperately crawled back up to her knees. "Greetings, mistress."

Jill peered at her. "Please tell me you aren't a golem."

An odd request for her first order, but not a difficult one to fulfil. "I'm not a golem, mistress."

"Good. Then why are you calling me mistress? And if you try telling me it's because I'm the mayor of somewhere or other, it won't end well."

Keri pondered. She'd never owned slaves before, and had certainly never *been* one, so she wasn't entirely sure how they were supposed to address their masters. 'Mistress' had seemed like a reasonable choice, but apparently this eccentric individual found it distasteful for some reason. In that case, it was probably best to just ask. "Then how do you wish me to address you?"

"Jill will suffice. And what's your name?"

So she'd been traded away without anyone even bothering about her name? Despite the apparently good treatment, that still rankled. Was she so unimportant? "My name is Keri, mist... umm... Miss Jill."

Before Jill could respond, another voice sounded from outside the room. "Ooo, did she wake up?"

Another girl boisterously entered the room, this one apparently wearing all of the clothing that Jill was missing. Keri briefly wondered why they didn't share, before a knot in her stomach informed her that this new girl was every bit as scary as Jill was. An unclear memory surfaced, of seeing the two before. It involved an awful lot of red.

"Hi! My name is Anya. Do you want to be my friend?"

"Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Whatever you want!"

"Yay! Now I have two!"

Keri looked at the beaming, disarming smile on Anya's face. Why did she think this girl was scary? Another memory flickered, of a severed head rolling in front of her face. She dismissed it. She'd been afraid of the bandits, and had some bad dreams. That was all. It was over now. She had this pair of nice, friendly new mistresses. Or maybe Jill was the mistress and this Anya was a fellow slave? It didn't matter. She climbed back upright, feeling more steady on her feet this time. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"Let's play dress up! Jill did me, so I haven't had a chance to be on the other side yet."

Jill sighed as Anya dragged a confused-looking Keri past her and out of the room. In retrospect, she should have asked Anya to hold back; the prisoners had been rather traumatised by her display during their rescue. She hadn't realised how many bandits there would be, expecting only a couple of guards left behind. Too late to regret that now though, and they all seemed to have recovered enough to walk, Keri being the last of them. Now, as soon as Anya stopped messing around, they could pack the house back away and start walking towards the next town.

She glanced at the cave walls out of the window. It was impressive how Anya had managed to fit the two-story house into a cave only three metres high, but it beat sleeping on the cave floor, especially

now that they had a half dozen former hostages to worry about, most of whom were more terrified of Anya than the bandits. At least one of them had accepted her offer of friendship. She was a bit odd, that Keri, and Jill couldn't help feeling there had been a misunderstanding somewhere. Still, it was no matter. They wouldn't be together for long.

She left them to their own devices, heading out of the house to poke at the bandits' ill-gotten gains. It wasn't like her and Anya needed any more cash, but maybe it could be returned to the former owners, or given to the captives.

---

Jill opened her mouth for the tenth time in the last five minutes. Also for the tenth time, she found that she lacked the words to articulate what she was thinking, and closed it again. In front of her, Keri bounced happily through the forest, jumping between shadows and giggling like a child, the little bells on her new collar and tail jingling in time with her footfalls. Jill instead turned to Anya, who was walking next to her. "You didn't do anything weird to her, did you?"

Anya looked hurt. "Of course not," she answered.

If only she could trust Anya's standard for 'weird'. It had, in retrospect, been a terrible idea to leave the two alone, a fact which had become abundantly clear the second she saw Keri leave the house. "And you insist she picked out that outfit herself? I'd have taken her for a fairly wealthy merchant, when we picked her up. Now she's... I don't even know what that is."

The other rescued captives followed behind in a far more subdued fashion, each clutching their own little bag of the bandits' gold, and keeping their eyes firmly downwards, not wanting to be a part of this conversation.

"What's wrong with it? She looks cute."

"Well, yes, obviously. But that's not normally the sort of outfit that one would *willingly* wear."

The other women trailing behind pretended to hear nothing, despite every single one of them wanting to scream about the hypocrisy of that comment. What sort of woman would willingly wear what Jill had on, either? Or, more accurately, what she *didn't* have on.

Jill inspected the surprisingly energetic Keri, who was simultaneously wearing the maid and sexy kitten outfits, her tail poking out from under her dress and waving from side to side as she moved. Despite her general bounciness and the surrounding forest, she was doing a marvellous job of keeping it all clean. "And she's wearing *that* tail?"

"Yup. When I mentioned how much you liked it when I wore it, she insisted."

Jill shrugged. Maybe she was just really thankful to her rescuers and wanted to repay them in some way? Still weird, but Jill was aware she hadn't exactly been entirely sane herself recently either. Ever since that time she'd... What had even happened? She'd woken up in her room back at the Marketplace of Affection, with Anya looking concernedly at her, and everything had been *different*. It was obviously all Anya's fault, somehow, but she was having fun, and now Keri looked like she was having fun too, so all was good. No problems here, so no reason to question it. No, wait, there was one important question that occurred. "I trust you washed it first?"

"Of course I did! I still remember everything you taught me about hygiene."

Jill was right; Keri was having fun. Obviously her previous rich-commoner outfit had no place on a slave, and the one called Anya had taken her away to change into something more appropriate. She pulled out dozens of outfits literally from nowhere; she must be a very powerful space mage to be able to do that so casually! And yet she was always acting so subservient to the one called Jill. Jill must

be fearsome indeed! Most of the outfits Anya had made her try on had been too outlandish for her to consider keeping, but given what Jill and Anya were wearing, or *weren't* wearing, in Jill's case, obviously they didn't consider themselves tied down by any social norms.

By the time they'd finished, she'd settled on a plain maid's dress, which was more suited to her new station in life while not being a complete embarrassment. And then she'd seen the cat ears, and they were just so cute that she couldn't resist, and there was that black collar with the bell on, and of course a slave should have a collar. They also came with paws and a tail. The paws were right out; she'd need her hands to carry out her duties, whatever they may turn out to be. And the tail was... what even was that? How did that even *work*? And then Anya had told her and *eww*, no way. But then Anya had mentioned how much Jill liked it, and Jill was terrifying, so Keri should obviously be trying her best to appease her, and in went the tail. Unexpectedly, it didn't actually feel bad at all.

Of course, by this point she realised that her stated goal of not being a complete embarrassment had been missed by a wide margin, but as she inspected herself in a mirror, she had to admit that she did look cute. The way that Anya was squealing at her in delight left her with no way to back out now. And then Anya had put the paws on her *anyway*, and she hadn't had the heart to say no. Then they'd all left the house, and they were still somehow in the bandit's cave, despite the house being far bigger than it, and then Anya had *picked up* the house and casually tucked it away into a pocket, and Keri had realised what a small person she was in such a large and wonder-filled universe. To think she was *happy* with her caravan. She'd been introduced to more new concepts in the past hour than in her past decade. She decided she would follow her new mistress to the ends of the world, and experience as much of it as she could.

She did stop to consider *why* they were still in the bandit cave, despite her apparently having been sold off already, but her brain

had decided the particular memories that would have helped her out there were strictly off limits. That was unfortunate; she may not have been looking forward to her future experiences quite as much had she realised how much gore they were likely to contain. But for now, she was happy, bouncing through the forest in childlike glee. The sun was bright, the future out of her paws, and she no longer had to worry about losing her livelihood with a single bad caravan run. Admittedly, that was because it had already happened, but at least it couldn't happen twice. She spread her arms wide and skipped in circles around the trees.

## Part 8

A golem army marched a hundred abreast along a forest path only wide enough for five. This led to a large amount of damage to the forest, but that was no concern; golems didn't need forests. The company leader spotted something further along the road and held up a fist. A hundred thousand golems marching behind him stopped as one, in a seriously impressive feat of coordination.

In front of the army a tree blocked off the road, but that was not what the designated captain had been looking at. After all, the army had been marching straight through quite a large portion of the forest already. One more tree would hardly bother them. No, what it was looking at was the blood spatter and mashed up remains that decorated the area. All captains had been required to inspect the site of the Creature's defeat of the Rudellian army, to memorise the signs of the Creature's presence, and this golem was in no doubt about what it was looking at.

Erasing the rest of existence was a laudable goal, but it relied on the rest of existence not having the ability to fight back. The Creature *did* have that ability, and the mayor had given strict instructions not to engage it under any circumstances. The captain gave its orders, and the army spread out, forming a perimeter around this path. Scouts were dispatched to follow the Creature's trail, and messengers sent



back to Glimmerhome to report the find. They were determined not to make the mistake of antagonising the one being that could end their quest to ensure the safety of Glimmerhome.

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As Keri watched Jill arguing with the town guard, she reflected on her terrible mistake. It had taken a couple of days to reach Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port, given how unused most of the party were to walking. That had meant plenty of time for her mind to recover and recall a few more details about how she had ended up in the aforementioned party. She hadn't been sold, she'd been rescued, and even given a bag of gold greater than the worth of her caravan! And yet there she had been, prancing around in some sort of obscene cat-maid outfit, and *enjoying* it. She'd changed back to her usual dress after the first night, but the whole experience had left an unscratchable itch at the back of her mind.

What was she supposed to do now? She had the cash on hand to resume her old living as a travelling merchant, but her few hours of insanity had left her rather ambivalent about the whole idea. The life of a travelling merchant was stressful; worries about bandits, changes in market prices, theft. She'd *liked* forgetting all of her cares and worries for a while. Why couldn't she stay like that? She was tempted to sell herself to Jill for real, but how would she even start that conversation? 'Hi. I want to be your slave. Will you have me?' There's no way that would end well. She sighed again, for the millionth time that hour, and wondered why the guards were taking so long. For that matter, there were a *lot* of people hanging around outside the city. Was it some sort of festival? There were also rather more soldiers than normal lining the walls. She'd never seen the city like this before...

"Hey Keri. What's wrong? You look sad, and friends shouldn't be sad."

Keri jumped. She'd been so busy inspecting the crowds that she hadn't even noticed Anya walking up. The other bandit victims were doing their best to keep their distance from Anya, knowing full well what she was capable of, which made Keri feel sorry for the girl. She'd spent enough time around her by now to know that even though she *could* kill the whole lot of them with a thought, that didn't mean that she *would*. Maybe by accident, but certainly not on purpose. "Don't worry, nothing's wrong."

"Then why all the sighing? That's something you humans do when sad, or worried about something, isn't it?"

'You humans'? What was that supposed to mean? "I'm just feeling a bit melancholic. Nothing I can put into words, sorry."

"Well, yes. Your mouth words are ridiculously limited. It's so much easier to just read stuff from your brain directly. Why don't we try?"

Keri noticed the others edging even further away from the pair of them. Darn it, she thought, Anya is going to do a Thing again, isn't she? And idiot that I am, I'm going to let her. This is going to be like that time they needed to camp in the forest and there wasn't enough space between the trees to fit the house, so Anya had taken out a plot of land to put the house on first, and put it down between the trees as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Keri had needed to close all the curtains for that rest stop, because looking out of the windows had *hurt*. Keri took a deep breath, and hoped she wasn't about to make another terrible mistake. "Okay, fine. If you want to talk to me telepathically or something, go for it."

It was indeed another terrible mistake.

Anya considered another way in which humans were weird. They enjoyed having things stuffed into most of their holes, but not into all of them. Why the difference? What was special about the nose? She had to hold Keri still as she sent in her tendrils, because with all of the wiggling she was worried Keri might damage something.

Fortunately, she quietened down after a while, and Anya was able to find what she was looking for. "Ah, I see. Well, that's easy enough to solve."

Anya withdrew her brain probes, and dragged the mildly stunned and majorly traumatised Keri over to Jill, who was trying to explain to the guard for the hundredth time that no, they weren't refugees from the war, and were just sightseers who happened to take out a pack of bandits and rescue a bunch of women on their way over. And besides, what war? Every town they'd been through on the way had been just fine, thank you very much.

"Hey Jill, Keri's getting all depressed because she thought you'd bought her, and then it turned out you hadn't, and now she doesn't have an excuse to dress up as a cat-maid and she was hoping you'd enslave her."

Yes, it had indeed been a *terrible* mistake. Keri and the guard each froze up, human instincts not having evolved to deal with something like Anya, and needing time to work out an appropriate response.

"You did your brain reading thing again, didn't you?" Jill asked, flicking Anya on the forehead. "We've already been over this. People think lots of things, not always deliberately, and they don't want every thought spoken out loud."

The guard managed to reboot ahead of Keri, latching onto a point of familiarity that he'd grasped as it flowed by. "Slavery is illegal, you know."

"Just ignore her," Jill muttered in resignation. "She's nice enough, but was at the back of the queue when common sense was being handed out. Or possibly in a different queue. Or a different universe."

Keri, beet red and well aware of the number of spectators who had overheard that little exchange, decided it was time to get out of there. She pulled her merchant's guild badge from a pocket. "Here's

my ID. I swear that she is telling the truth. These two really did rescue us from bandits, and I personally watched as they slaughtered half a dozen of them. Well, watched Anya, actually. Jill just ignored them all, like they weren't even worth her time."

That wasn't quite how Jill remembered it; perhaps there were still some lingering misunderstandings there that needed clearing up. But if it worked to get them into the city, then she wouldn't go out of the way to offer corrections right now.

"Look, even if I believed your story, which I don't, you still wouldn't be allowed in. The city is closed! If you were bringing food or supplies, things might be different, but a merchant's guild badge with no wares means nothing. We can't eat your gold."

Jill considered the amount of food Anya was carrying. Or had access to; 'carrying' was probably the wrong word for whatever it was she did. In any case, she had more than would fit in any cart. And in any case, even if she didn't, if Anya wanted to enter the city then Anya would damn well enter the city. But at this point she'd given up caring. "Right, that's enough. All I wanted was to visit the seaside, and we don't need to go through the city for that. Let's just follow the coast for a bit and find some fishing village that has an inn."

Jill stormed off, Anya following mellowly behind her. Keri, after a brief period of fluster, hurried after them. The other girls, who were residents of Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port, remained behind, pleading their cases and waving their gold. This was a *deadly* mistake. Keri may have made a couple of terrible mistakes, but at least they hadn't been fatal.

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The golem scout watched the Creature and her Friend leave without entering the city, along with one further human on which it had no information, and was deemed unimportant. It waited for them to safely crest the horizon, then signalled the army to advance.

A hundred thousand golems surrounded the city. It never stood a chance. And if only one guard had happened to believe the tale of a rag-tag group of women, the outcome may have been very different.

## Part 9

Anya sat out on a veranda with her pair of newfound friends, sipping a cup of tea. There was a beautiful view of bright blue skies, glass-clear water with the odd fishing boat dotted around, and a perfect and pristine sandy beach. The sound of waves breaking against the beach provided a relaxing ambience. The sounds of the children screaming as they played on the beach were *not* relaxing, but there wasn't a lot that could be done about that; Jill would get cross if she cut their voice boxes out. She would just need to ignore them.

"So, to recap, you are a Creature of the Void, and you're on some sort of mission to gather friends?"

And Keri, her newest friend, was Taking An Interest. Life was, indeed, perfect. "Yup. All the other Creatures are boring old farts, and they never want to hang around with me, so when someone from this world did a summoning ritual, I dived right in."

Keri nodded at Jill. "You sure summoned an interesting one."

"No, wait, I wasn't the summoner," she denied, shaking her head. "She just visited me when I was working as a courtesan, and we ended up kind of sticking together. I blame the diamonds."

"Huh? What happened to the summoner then?"

Anya had to answer that one. "His head exploded," she responded sheepishly. The other two girls stared at her in accusation, leaving her to frantically explain, "it wasn't my fault! I just got the volume a bit wrong when I tried to say hello. I didn't know you were all so fragile!"

It was, in retrospect, obvious why no summoner had ever managed to explain to a Creature what it was that they actually wanted. Maybe one day someone would think to push some sort of welcome pack with handy tourist guide and science textbook backwards through the portal, but until then, heads would continue to pop. Not that any of this mattered; when someone summoned a Creature, what they normally wanted was death and destruction, so explanations were not required. It all just happened naturally.

Jill meanwhile was struggling with a bit of *déjà vu*. Hadn't she heard this story before, just before everything went weird? Things were still a bit foggy, but she'd definitely heard all this already. And then Anya had told her her name. Not 'Anya', but her *other* name. The real one. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at Anya.

Anya wriggled uncomfortably. "Umm... It really was an accident. Please don't look at me like that. I won't do it again!"

"I don't care about some stupid mage. Answer me honestly. Did you explode my head?"

Anya continued to wriggle. "Umm... No?"

Jill's eyes narrowed further.

"Maybe I... umm... melted it a bit? Just a little? But I put it back together as good as new afterwards!"

"So that's why I've felt so strange ever since. I knew it was your fault," Jill muttered, flopping forwards onto the table. Heaving a big sigh, she glanced upwards at Keri. "You sure you want to stick with us? It's likely to get weird. Weirder. Whatever, you know what I mean."

Keri, who was carefully holding her cup of tea between both paws, on account of being unable to grasp the handle, considered that as

she took a sip. "I'm not actually sure it's possible for things to get any weirder. There has to be *some* sort of ceiling, right?"

"An interesting philosophical question, for sure, but please don't tempt fate."

That was when one of the locals, back far too early from his trip to sell the days catch at Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port, stumbled out onto the veranda, a tall glass of a fiery amber liquid that was most certainly not tea held in a shaky hand, muttering to himself. "Golems. Hundreds and hundreds of golems. Just standing there. Watching. *Waiting.*"

"Dammit!"

---

The golem scouts had tracked the Creature to a small fishing village, where she had stopped for the night. They'd then set up a perimeter around the area. They weren't being aggressive, just firmly suggesting that anyone trying to leave the village re-evaluate their plans for the day.

The perimeter extended *all* the way around the village, golems marching into the sea to complete the encirclement. Golems did not, after all, need to breathe. And once they were in position, a magic circle began to take shape. Had they not already been dead by this point, the collection of mages that had put together the previous record holder for the greatest banishment circle would have been greatly disappointed to know how short-lived their record would be. The sigils forming the base of the magic continued to take shape throughout the night. Golems, after all, did not need to rest.

By the next afternoon, their work was complete. They had built the *new* greatest banishment circle the world had ever seen, and this one had the additional advantage that the target was on the inside.

---

Jill remained at their table, debating whether to question the fisherman before he got too drunk to answer. On the one hand, she finally had a bit of peace and quiet, and had no desire to spoil it. On the other, this was probably all Anya's fault, somehow, and they should set about fixing it before things got worse. Alas, she never got the chance to discover that it was actually all her *own* fault, because at that point the sky vanished.

Keri looked upwards with curiosity. "Okay, you win. Things can get weirder. Where did the sun go?" She looked back down, out towards the sea. "And is it just me, or does the horizon suddenly look a lot closer?"

Jill glanced outwards. "Nope, not just you. Anya? Any ideas?"

"Umm... I seem to be back home. Someone just teleported the entire village into the Void."

"What? How? *Why?*"

"How does that even work? Shouldn't all the air drift off? How is there gravity? Why isn't the water spilling out of the sea? How can we still see with the sun gone?"

There was a surprising absence of panic. Being unexpectedly teleported to an alien plane of existence was something else that humans hadn't evolved to cope with, and it would probably take a few minutes to work out that panic was an appropriate response. Things would have been different had the floor and air not been transported with them, but for now there was just surprise and confusion. The fisherman at the next table just stared at his glass in admiration, before muttering what good stuff it was and taking another swig.

That all ended when the hole where the sky should be opened an eye. It was a big, lazy eye, stretching almost from horizon to horizon, and it took some time to open, giving plenty of time for everyone to



notice it. There was a tinkle of smashed glass from a few of the other tables.

"Oh, it's my little cousin. Hi! I mean, *HI! PLEASE BE CAREFUL AROUND THESE LITTLE ONES! THEY BREAK EASILY!*"

The eye slowly closed again, followed by a distinct feeling of absence where presence had once been.

"Pfft. See what I mean? Boring. He didn't even bother to say hello."

Jill remembered to breathe again, after having more important things on her mind for the prior minute. After a few gasps, she managed, "this is ridiculous. How do we get back home?"

"No idea. It was a summoning, not a portal I made, so I don't know where your world was exactly. There's an infinite number of worlds, all no more than a shadow's width apart, which makes finding any one particular world a real pain."

"But... we can't just stay here."

"Why not?"

Jill pondered. Surely there was some obvious, succinct reason? Ah, yes, so there was. Several, in fact. "Because of the giant floating eyes that might accidentally kill us all? Also, we need food, drink and fresh air?"

Actually, quite a lot of land had been transported with them. The circle had been *big*, to keep the workings out of sight of the village, and it may have been possible to be self sufficient. The fishing industry would be unlikely to survive, given the abruptly cut-off sea, but there was land enough for food crops. Assuming anyone had seeds. And assuming anything would grow with no sun, even if they could still see somehow. "Yeah, all in all, I think it's best to get out of here. No offence to your home, but it's not really suited for humans."

Anya considered that. This was another option she'd never considered; if none of the natives of the Void wanted to talk to her, could she have brought in some friends from outside? Open air wasn't really suited for fish, and yet the inn they were staying at had several of them, swimming around in a fish tank. She could do the same thing, and set up her own little human tank, filled with air and dirt and light and whatever else humans needed to grow. But that wouldn't really be the same as exploring other worlds. It would probably get boring too quickly, and then she'd be stuck having to care for a bunch of delicate little mortals forever. "Okay. Gimme a sec, and I'll try to find a world that's similar enough to drop the village into."

Anya vanished with a pop, leaving Jill and Keri alone at the table. They watched a bunch of kids pick up twigs and rush towards the edge of existence, presumably to poke it. Keri was the first to speak. "Yes, I do intend to stick with you. It's always interesting, and completely stress free."

"Whu? *Stress free*?" Jill asked with incredulity. "What part of being thrown into the Void with no way to return is *stress free*?"

"But I couldn't have done anything about it, could I? Back when I was a merchant, I had to choose which wares to stock up on, and then make a couple of days journey, during which all I'd worry about was whether I'd made the right choice, not knowing if I was going to make a profit or loss at the other end. I didn't have any choice here. It wasn't like I woke up this morning and decided 'I'm going to get teleported to the Void today'. Not my fault, no forewarning, nothing I could do about it, so no reason to feel guilty or stressed. It's simply not my responsibility."

"That's... an interesting way of looking at it. And I'd say you looked pretty darn stressed after Anya had her tentacles up your nose."

"She just caught me by surprise, that's all. Besides..." Keri trailed off without finishing her sentence, blushing lightly.

Anya reappeared with another pop, before Jill could pry open that particular nugget of gossip. "Right, found a decent one. There's water, land, air, plants and animals, no existing life intelligent enough to say anything other than 'ugg', so they shouldn't protest new arrivals. The air has oxygen in it, and nothing that would be poisonous. Also, no golems that I saw. Not sure why that's important, but for some reason I got that impression it would be appreciated."

Jill blinked. "That sounds... remarkably well thought through. Well done." There's probably a catch somewhere, she thought, but right now getting away from the giant floating eyes was more important. In the logical part of her mind she knew that it had been a Creature, exactly the same species as Anya and theoretically no more scary than she was, but the part of her mind that had seen a frelling giant eyeball where the sky should be was really not interested in logic. "We should get going."

Anya nodded, and the sky turned green.

## **Part 10**

Archmage Christoph channelled his mana into the divination rune, reaching out between worlds to view his former home. He had no regrets about running away, but he really would like to return at some point. While perfectly liveable, the emerald-green sky here was starting to grate on his nerves, not to mention all the weird floating eyeballs. Friendly and cuddly as they may be, they were still freaky. Besides, as much as he loved his children, home schooling was starting to get old. He was really missing the hours of peace that a regular school day brought, and surely the Creature must have got bored and left by now.

His scrying found the city of Glimmerhome easily enough, but all that was there was a mess. Barely any of the city seemed to be intact, and the divination revealed a complete absence of human life. He zoomed out, but every other city he found showed the same devastation. In something of a panic, he scanned the entire continent, and then the whole world. Not a single human life remained. Well... so much for going home. What idiot provoked the Creature badly enough for it to wipe out all civilisation, for goodness' sake? Now he was *really* glad he'd taken his family and fled.

His divinations were interrupted by a knock at the front door. He'd made it halfway down the stairs before remembering that he'd relocated the house to a completely different dimension, and one that contained no intelligent life. Who would be *knocking*? In a brief moment of panic he thought the Creature may have followed him, but if that were the case it probably wouldn't bother being polite. Maybe one of the floating eyes had bumped into the door, and he'd mistaken it for a deliberate knock?

With alarm, he heard the door opening. It can't have been his wife; she would have more sense. It must be one of the kids. He accelerated desperately down the stairs, stopping again when a voice shouted, "dad, it's a door-to-door fish salesman. Do we want any fish?"

---

Keri petted the eyeball, stroking the sclera gently. It was bigger than her whole head, and was just kind of floating around her. If she ignored it for too long, it would start gently bumping against her. "Well, aren't you a needy little thing," she purred.

Jill was also petting one, far more gingerly. "Why eyeballs? Why *friendly* eyeballs? I mean, they are so very Anya, but even so... How can something like this even exist? How does it eat or breath or have babies?"

"It's another world," Keri answered with a shrug. "Our common sense may not apply."

"Wow. This must be how Anya feels *all the time*. Maybe I've been a little hard on her."

"Really? I thought you've been very understanding."

"As I mentioned before, humans don't speak aloud everything that we think, and believe me when I say I've thought some very rude things indeed."

Keri looked over at the aforementioned Anya, who was watching the proprietress, a large, friendly, no-nonsense woman by the name of Sarah, with riveted attention. She was making cocktails, up to and including the little fancy umbrellas. It was odd how life seemed to just go on. Fishermen had gone back to sea, and had started coming back with catches that had far more whiskers than sense. The children, no longer able to poke the infinite Void, were poking the floating eyeballs instead. Out in the distance she could see a couple of men evaluating a three metre high transparent blue crystal as a building material, the local plant life having already been deemed not tough enough for buildings or boats.

Admittedly, the first day had involved a lot of running around shouting and generalised not getting anything done, but after that they'd settled back down. Just because they were all in another universe didn't mean *they* didn't need to eat, whatever arrangements the local wildlife seemed to have made. Oddly, no-one had tried to eat the eyeballs. It made some sort of sense; plenty of people didn't enjoy food that stared back at you, and while you could cut the head off a fish, that wasn't an option here. Or maybe they thought they were relatives of the earlier eye in the sky, and didn't want to risk antagonising it.

Jill wondered if she should admit to the poor villagers that her party was probably to blame, but decided against it because there wasn't

anything anyone could do with that information other than yell at her. It certainly wouldn't help anyone. Besides, while she was reasonably sure everything was somehow Anya's fault, she had no actual evidence. No point going around taking blame without evidence. It may have just been a coincidence.

That trail of thought was interrupted when she spotted someone in expensive robes, looking completely out of place for the village, whose clothing tended towards cheap and practical. He was walking along the beach, or at least, along the strip of land that joined land to sea. Beaches were generally sand or pebbles, in Jill's experience, but if someone has described this new-world's beach as 'golden', they wouldn't have been speaking metaphorically. Some of the villagers had chipped a few pieces off, joked about how rich they were, and then tried to buy some drinks with it. Sarah had punched them in the face, in a friendly, no-nonsense sort of way.

The enrobed individual was looking around the village in interest, but when his eyes met Jill's, he immediately changed direction. "Hey, Anya," Jill called, "looks like we might have trouble."

Anya walked over, looking disappointed that she was going to miss whatever it was Sarah had been about to do with the pineapple. Keri was peering down to the beach. "Isn't that Christoph?"

"You'll have to be a bit more specific. Is that someone I should know?"

"The famous arch-mage? From Glimmerhome, same as you? How can there be anyone from Glimmerhome who doesn't know him?"

"Oh, that Christoph. Yeah, I've heard of him, but it's not like I've ever seen him. In my line of work, I saw more of the people who *weren't* in happy marriages."

"Ah, right, fair enough. What do you think he wants?"

"No idea. We'll have to wait and see. How did he even get here? Was he in the village too?"

It took a couple of minutes for him to reach them, needing to walk around the whole building and enter through the front door to reach the veranda. The wait was somewhat awkward. They knew he could see them, and he knew they could see him, so should they walk to the edge of the veranda and call down? Jump down themselves? Walk out and meet him part way? Just sitting here unmoving seemed rude somehow, but then it was him who seemed to be aiming for them, so presumably the onus was on him to do the work. It was the sort of situation that made Anya complain about how complicated social interaction was.

"So, would you care to explain?" he inquired the second he stepped out of the inn, still breathing heavily from the brisk walk.

"Umm... Explain what?"

"Don't play games. You're obviously involved. How did this village get here?"

"What makes you think we have anything to do with it? It could have been anyone. Besides, how did *you* get here?"

"Bah. I know protagonists when I see them. You may not have the stupid hair or the ridiculous swords bigger than you are, but you've got the completely nonsensical outfits down perfectly."

"What? That's... that's... clothist! You can't judge someone based on what they're wearing!"

"I'm judging *you* based on what you're *not* wearing, missy. And there's her over there wearing enough black lace to weigh down an elephant and yet somehow still walking around normally, and then there's member number three who seems to have decided that

opposable thumbs are overrated. All three of you are completely impractical."

"Look, we really don't know much," Jill insisted. "We were enjoying tea in this inn, completely innocently, when someone teleported the whole village into the Void. We have no idea who or why, aside from one of the fishermen mentioning something about golems, and it was only thanks to Anya over there that we could get back out."

Anya gave a happy little wave, and Christoph looked over at her. Not an inspection of her clothing, or a glance at her face, but properly at her. He saw her for what she was, he screamed and he fainted.

"Well, that was odd," Jill commented, poking Christoph's prone body with her toe. "What did he do that for?"

---

Jill was seated in a reception room of Christoph's mansion, looking incredibly sheepish. A couple of burley fishermen had given them a hand in carrying his unconscious body back here, which was surprisingly not far at all from the village. Anya could have just carried him herself, or tucked him away into a pocket, but while Jill had no objection to letting her do that with houses, treating an actual person like that seemed wrong somehow.

Nursed by his wife, a beautiful lady by the name of Alice, he'd woken up quickly. They'd managed to give a slightly more detailed explanation of events back on their home-world, during which time he managed not to scream or faint once, and then he'd shut himself away in a study for a bit to do some more divination. Then he'd come back out, angrily proclaimed the entire thing Jill's fault, and shared with everyone the story of the lost continent of Foooh.

So... It hadn't been Anya's fault at all. Jill had caused a golem apocalypse, and wiped out all human life on the planet. And they'd banished Anya on account of being the one thing there that could stop them. Well... that sucked, but she couldn't make herself feel *too*



guilty. There should have been an instruction manual, or big warning signs, or *something*. It could have happened to anyone. It wasn't as if the correct operation of golems was on the syllabus back at school. But that did mean there wasn't any point in going home. With Christoph's help, finding the correct universe was easy, but with the whole place overrun by golems intent on the destruction of all intelligent life, this place was looking like a far more feasible living space, floating eyeballs or not.

"So... now what?"

Keri was the one who asked, but it was what they were all thinking. The village would need to become completely self sufficient before their existing supplies ran out, and plan for a future in which they were the only intelligent inhabitants of the planet. Christoph's presence would help, adding the considerable weight of his magic to their efforts. It really was an amazing coincidence that he happened to be here, right on the same world Anya had found them.

Alice wore an expression of mild confusion, thinking the answer was obvious and wondering why no-one else was mentioning it. "Since Anya can hop between worlds so easily, why not ask her to pop back to our original one to collect seeds, tools and maybe some livestock, if there's any left alive? Or find a world that has humanish inhabitants who wouldn't mind taking in some refugees?"

Christoph recoiled from the thought of asking a favour from a Creature, but Anya perked up. "Oh, yeah. I could totally do that. Or I could just get rid of all the golems."

## **Part 11**

The mayor of Glimmerhome was having a bad day. The week had started so well; the identified primary threat to the city, the Creature, had been sent back to the Void where it belonged. Humans, identified as the second most dangerous threat, had been

completely eradicated worldwide. There was still plant life whose roots could chew through stone, and microscopic life forms like mould that could consume the city if left unchecked, but they weren't immediate threats, and now that the more imminent issues had been dealt with, the mayor was expecting a slow but effortless job to eradicate them.

The question needed to be raised of what constituted 'Gimmerhome', as well as the actual tasks and responsibilities of the mayor. One responsibility was to ensure the prosperity of the city, which he had obviously accomplished brilliantly; it was now the only, and hence the most prosperous, city on the planet. He also needed to ensure its safety, an obligation which again had been fulfilled to his satisfaction. As to the question of what Glimmerhome *was*, that was harder. Most residences had been deconstructed for golem building materials, but without anyone living in them, did they serve any purpose as part of the city? The mayor certainly saw no reason to rebuild them. The same could be said of any other structures; shops were pointless without shoppers, inns without guests.

The old mayor from a few generations back had once opined that a city was its people, but the people of Glimmerhome had abandoned it. There was a city ordinance that explicitly stated golems were not to be considered citizens, or even people, for the purposes of law, yet there was another one that required the city mayor to have been a registered citizen for a period of at least five years prior to election. It was the sort of conflict that a logical and inflexible golem mind was not constructed to cope with, but he had done his best. It had been the previous mayor that had elected him, and therefore he decided that election must have come with an implicit addition that he was to be retroactively declared a citizen. Therefore, since he was the entirety of the city's people, he was by extension the city, and all else was nothing but decoration.

That was as far as his philosophical introspection had reached when an alarm started blaring. He had decided that another possible,

albeit unlikely, threat to the city was an invasion from another plane of existence, and as such had ordered the creation of a worldwide barrier to deflect any incoming portals. The alarm that had just gone off signalled the penetration of this barrier. They were facing an invasion from the unknown.

That had been only two hours ago, and already he'd lost contact with the entire northern continent. There had been no communication about what was attacking; contact was simply lost, the golems no longer active. Without information, how could he prepare a defence? Another point of light blipped off on his map, this time on an eastern continent. Whatever was attacking had moved between continents, and at the current rate of progress, it would be here in two to six hours, depending on the route it chose. The city must be defended.

In the absence of knowledge of the attacker, he ordered the creation of a range of magical barriers, in the hopes that they would at least do *something*. He watched lights continue to blink off one by one. Thankfully, the route taken by their aggressor was the longest one, and he came to this continent last, giving plenty of time to set up more defences around the city. They achieved nothing, shattered in an instant. As he gazed forlornly at the now dark map, a voice sounded behind him.

"Someone has been a very *very* naughty boy."

So, not content with destroying all that he had built, this enemy was even going to steal his trademark popping-up-behind-people trick? It was *truly* a bad day.

---

Jill and Keri sat relaxing in their house, which Anya had set up on the outskirts of the village before leaving. She'd even stocked the kitchen with food, in case she was gone for a few days. Jill had to acknowledge that she was getting more thoughtful, or at least better at understanding the sort of things she needed to be thoughtful

about. Long gone was the Anya of old, who didn't realise that stuffing tendrils down someone's throat would cause suffocation.

"I have to admit, that trick with the eel was impressive."

"Thanks, but I can't do it half as well as Anya," Jill admitted. "She was the one who taught me in the first place."

"Really? How does Anya have any experience in that sort of thing?"

"She cheats; given how she can probe *brains*, imagine how simple other body parts must be."

Had Jill known that she'd acquired at least some information from eating the head of a co-worker, she may have been less sanguine about her skills, but it was still annoying to know that Anya was better than her at her own job. Stupid overpowered interdimensional beings. Was there *anything* she couldn't do? At least, once it had been carefully explained to her, in completely unambiguous and highly detailed terms. Jill wasn't jealous as such, being the beneficiary of much of Anya's overpoweredness, but she still needed to find something to do other than playing caretaker.

A pop signalled the return of their favourite human-shaped eldritch horror.

"I'm back!"

"How'd it go?" Keri asked, trying and failing to sit more upright in her comfy seat.

"I took out all the golems, but they'd been systematically burning... well, *everything*. There's not much soil left, no plant or animal life at all, and there's so much smoke around that even breathing the air would be deadly. I couldn't even find any seeds. It's beyond my ability to fix, sorry."

Oh, so there *was* something she couldn't do. That was reassuring. Jill had been half expecting Anya to snap her fingers and bring everyone the golems had killed back to life or something. So, they were stuck here for the rest of their lives then. Or the village was, anyway. The three of them could go travelling anywhere. Literally. Anya could hop between universes the same way as one would visit a neighbour. One human lifetime would be nowhere near enough to see it all.

"I'd need to reverse time around the entire planet or something," Anya added, unhappily.

Jill blinked. What was that last part? "Wait, you can just... *undo* everything?"

"Of course. It's not complicated."

Jill peered suspiciously. That was far too convenient, and besides, why was Anya sounding unhappy about it? "What's the catch? You don't sound like you want to do that."

"Of course not! You made that golem the city mayor before we left Glimmerhome, long before we met Keri. I'd have to lose a friend! Not to mention you'd lose all of your memories since then too."

"You'd get to rescue me from the bandits and make friends with me all over again then," Keri answered. "That isn't so bad, is it?"

Jill was flabbergasted. Was Anya really rating a few weeks of memories as highly as the entire planet? Flattering, but no. Even without the niggling sense of responsibility that came from the knowledge that she was responsible for all the death in the first place, it should be obvious which was more important. It seemed she would need to act as caretaker for a little longer.

"There were millions of lives lost to the golems. That's worth more than some memories. If you can fix it, you should."

"But... they weren't my friends! They aren't important."

Maybe friends were more important than strangers, but not *that* much more, Jill thought. It was another common sense thing, and Jill had no idea how to put it into words. Fortunately, she didn't need to. "Anya, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but shove those tendrils of yours up my nose and look at what I'm thinking."

"Oh, right! Of course! I'm glad I've got you around to tell me when I'm being silly. I can just read your memories now, and then give them back to you in the past!"

"What? That wasn't what I was..." Jill managed to start, before her ability to speak was crippled by a suddenly enthusiastic Anya.

Keri grinned, knowing full well what both of them had been thinking. Misunderstandings could be inconvenient things. Even putting her original slavery misconception aside, it hadn't been until they'd made it to that nameless little fishing village that she'd realised that Jill wasn't some monstrously powerful hero, but was a completely ordinary girl. Jill and Anya were friends, not servant and master, or employee and guard. Or more accurately, friends-with-benefits. And Anya had been completely genuine when she had invited Keri into the group. When she'd invited *everyone* into the group. Keri had originally only said yes due to fear, but she was glad that she had. All the other idiots who'd turned her down had no idea what they were missing.

Finished with Jill, Anya started on Keri, who accepted her with open arms, and only a small amount of thrashing around and screaming. As much as she wanted to relax and let Anya do her thing, having tentacles thrust into her brain was still traumatic.

---

A five metre square basement somewhere below the Institute of Inadvisable Incantations suddenly contained about one and a half metres of naked human girl. If she was going to reverse time

anyway, she might as well undo all of her own mistakes too, starting with the first one.

"Hi! Do you want to be my friend?"

The summoner stared at the diminutive being now standing in centre of his carefully laid out pattern of blood, candles, mystical sticks and single confused-looking duck. This was not how he'd expected things to go. Where was all the screaming? The death and destruction? Why was there a *girl*? Why was she *naked*?

Anya, wondering why the summoner was staring so hard at her chest, looked down. Drat, there was always *something*. The dress she'd been wearing hadn't been something she'd made herself, but came from a shop on this world, so it had been caught up in the time reversal. She sighed and sprouted a pretty reasonable copy.

"So, is that a no then? Can you at least tell me what it is that you want? People keep summoning us, but they never tell us *why*."

"Whu? But... You're not..." the summoner stammered.

"Fine, let's try something easier," Anya sighed. "How about your name?"

"But... But... What?"

"Fine. I give up. We'll just have to do this the easy way."

Anya stepped over and violated his face, found out that he'd summoned her in the hopes of killing everyone in the university, then splattered him all over the walls. Apparently her first 'mistake' had been the correct course of action all along. Also, his name had been John. How boring. Still, at least this time the university hadn't been destroyed, and no-one knew she was here. There was no reason to evacuate the city, Jill would never end up the accidental mayor, and they could all take it easy. Well, except for the Rudellian army.

They'd need to do something about that at some point, but it shouldn't be too hard.

With a smile, Anya stepped out of the basement and leaped over the wall.

## Epilogue

"Hey, come downstairs, you have a customer!"

Jill sighed. Really? At this time of day? Who was *that* desperate? Still, a job was a job, so she plastered on her work smile and went to greet her client. She had been expecting some ugly, hopeless old man, and was therefore rather surprised to find herself faced with a beaming girl, in an absolutely stunning black dress and without a single blemish visible on her body. Why the hell did she feel the need to *pay* people for sex? Surely men and women alike would be falling over each other for her. Was there some sort of horrid disfiguration hiding under that dress or something?

"Jill!" the girl exclaimed, running up and squeezing her in a far stronger hug than her thin arms should be capable of. What? Did the girl know her? Jill was pretty sure she'd never seen the girl before in her life. This had better not be one of those scams where someone tried to claim she was their long-lost mother. She looked over at the madam, who uncharacteristically just shrugged. Odd; she was normally pretty strict about this sort of thing. "Here, your share," she said, before tossing over a diamond. Jill just stared, completely slack jawed. *A diamond?! What the actual heck?* She stared down at the girl, who was still wearing a big, dopy grin, and shrugged in turn. For a diamond, she could tolerate a lot of weirdness.

She brought the girl up to her room, but still needed to sate her curiosity. "You're acting like you know me," she commented, "but I'm pretty sure I've not met you before. What's going on?"



The girl's smile vanished briefly, before reappearing in a reduced form that suggested a touch of sadness. "It's okay. I'll help you remember. But first..." The smile reappeared in full form, but this time, despite the friendly facade, Jill felt a sudden chill run down her back. "Since I've already paid for your time, and now that I actually know what I'm paying for, I'm going to take the opportunity to teach you the eel trick all over again. Slowly and carefully. And probably several times."

A couple of hours later, the madam again left the front desk, but this time for a completely different reason. Rather than packing her suitcase and fleeing, she simply made a note to see what could be done to improve the building's soundproofing. She was used to some amount of noise, but whatever was going on in Jill's room today was... *distracting*.

---

Keri watched on as a couple of porters loaded up her carts with barrels of wine and boxes of dried fruits. The wine in particular was a big risk; the weather up north had been dry this year, but while the grape crop was looking like it might fail, there was still plenty of time for it to be rescued by a last-minute shower. If that happened, demand for imported wine would drop through the floor. If it didn't, she would be the first one there with bulk wine for sale right at the point where it became certain that their own crop for the year would be useless. If the weather held, her gamble would pay off big time, but a gamble it was. No-one could accurately predict the weather. Sometimes she wondered why she'd taken on the life of a travelling merchant, but it wasn't as if new opportunities dropped from the sky.

"Keri!"

She looked around for the source of the voice, spotting a girl in an utterly ridiculous black dress, beaming and waving manically at her. Standing next to her was a rather resigned-looking girl who looked

like she should have long since frozen to death, as undressed as she was.

"Hi Keri. I'm Jill, this overenthusiastic one is Anya, and yes we do know you." She glanced around at the porters, and suspicious looking guards, before adding, "but I suggest we go somewhere private to talk about it."

The closest guards frowned, one putting a hand on his sword. "Do you know these two, miss?"

"No," Keri replied, shaking her head.

"Then I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

"What?!" exclaimed Anya, incensed, but Jill put a hand on her before she could say more.

"Leave it. You have to admit we look ridiculously suspicious right now. Keri would have to be a fool to go anywhere alone with us."

"But... the bandits?"

Now even Keri was frowning. "What bandits?"

"There are bandits active in the forest before Slightly-Newer-Than-Evennewerport-Port. If you head that way, you'll be attacked."

"And how would you know that?" asked the guard, as some of the others started making motions to surround the two.

"Time travel," shrugged Jill. "It's a long story. We'll just rescue you after you get kidnapped, like last time, if we can't convince you here." It wasn't like either of them particularly cared about keeping secrets. The bigger problem was that Anya trying to perform a delicate operation on Keri's brain while surrounded by hostile guards and the general public would lead to a ridiculous number of complications,

and Jill really couldn't be bothered trying to sort them all out. Actually, speaking of kidnapping... Why wait? "Actually, Anya, change of plan. We're going to kidnap her ourselves instead. Don't injure the guards!"

A very busy ten seconds followed, starting with eight guards drawing swords and charging forward, and ending up with Anya, Jill and Keri standing on a spectacular golden beach, with the sun shining overhead in a cloudless, emerald-green sky. A floating eyeball that happened to be in the area spotted the new arrivals and bobbed over to see if they were interesting. Keri screamed.

Then Anya started doing her thing, and Keri screamed louder.

A few minutes later, Keri was sprawled on the beach, panting. "That was mean," she muttered. "Surely there was a better way of handling that."

"Well, we could have waited until your caravan got raided and your guards murdered, like last time," Jill answered pragmatically, "but I figured that since we could skip that part, we probably should."

"Fine, whatever. Let's just get back to my caravan before your faces end up on wanted posters across the whole kingdom."

"Wanted posters? People would want me? What's wrong with that?"

"That's... not what they're for. But never mind. Why don't you scrape up some of the beach, to pay off Keri's guards and stuff?"

"I can just make gold though. And don't we normally use diamonds?"

"True."

Keri, still prone on the floor, burst out laughing.

---

The general of the Rudellian army was confused. He had been on his way to Glimmerhome, along with twenty thousand men, and they'd set up camp in a forest. To keep the element of surprise for as long as possible, they'd been avoiding roads and clear plains where they could be spotted from a distance, even employing expensive illusion magics where there wasn't any natural cover available.

So far, so good. So why then, after falling asleep in his tent in that nameless forest, had he woken up in his own bed, back at home? Did he end up in a battle, suffer from memory loss, and have to be repatriated? That would be embarrassing. At the least, he hoped he managed to win the battle in the process. But he didn't hurt anywhere, and a bit of quick self inspection revealed no injuries, healed or otherwise. It was a mystery, and he *hated* mysteries.

If there was any consolation, it was that twenty thousand more men were currently sharing exactly the same mystery.

---

The bandit leader was dead. As were the bandits. Really, what did anyone expect? Anya's little group wasn't going to let them off the hook, especially with Keri still in the party. Anya did at least hold back a little this time, resulting in the bandits merely being 'dead' instead of 'minced', a small detail that the pair of captives they'd already collected greatly appreciated.

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"Excuse me, master."

The mayor of Glimmerhome yelped and jerked, but just barely managed to keep his balance.

"I swear, one of these days I'm going to get a chair with a seatbelt. What's happened now, and how many people died?"

"One of the mages from the Ill has summoned a Creature of the Void again, master."

The mayor looked out of his window at the building in the distance. It continued to look distinctly building-shaped, with no signs of the smoke, destruction, craters, screaming, or other paraphernalia that should accompany that declaration.

"Are you sure? It still looks intact to me."

"One of the staff didn't show up for work this morning, and when the faculty investigated his room, they found the summoning sigil. It was drained, having already been used. There was also some amount of flesh, blood and bones coating the walls and ceiling, which when scraped off and collected together, proved to weigh about the same as the missing researcher. Eyewitnesses also reported a humanoid figure leaping the walls of the facility, and the guard captain confirms a breach in the barrier at a time matching the eyewitness reports."

The mayor considered that. His servant wouldn't be bothering him with this information if he didn't have confidence in its veracity, but even a *small* Creature would be a hundred metres in length, and be rather too well endowed in the tentacle department to be described as humanoid. The mayor would have suspected the mad mages of the Ill of confusing their sigils, and it being a demon summoning or something, except that a demon wouldn't have been able to escape the barrier. But... The mayor glanced out of the window again, at the peaceful scene playing out below. It probably wouldn't stay that way for long, Glimmerhome being what it was, but if there was a Creature out there then it shouldn't be that way *now*.

"A girl matching the description was seen entering a brothel in the marketplace, leaving with one of their courtesans a number of hours later. The proprietress reported that the girl paid in diamonds, and that her employee resigned, claiming they were going travelling together. Examination of the room revealed a number of eels in various states of distress, but nothing else out of the ordinary. There have been no further sightings."

"I think," opined the mayor, after some thought, "that it would be best to pretend this never happened."

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It was a number of years later, and the group of three were dawdling over a narrow rock bridge. Keri peered interestedly over the edge at the tarry blackness below, which occasionally formed big bubbles that floated up to the ceiling. There was a time when she was afraid of heights, but somehow the world they'd visited last year that was entirely made out of spiders had made all other fears seem completely inconsequential. That feeling when they'd arrived, of sinking slightly into the floor, followed by the *crawling* as the floor itself rose up around her legs, still made her shudder at night. Besides, if she fell, Anya would catch her. Probably.

Jill watched one of the bubbles impact a bubble of light that had dripped down from the ceiling, the two annihilating with a loud foomp, making Keri's ears twitch in surprise. "I thought it was like a scaled-up version of one of those lava lamps from that world we visited a couple of months back, but I'm pretty sure they didn't go 'foomp'."

"Nah," Anya answered, "they just used wax. This is actual liquid light and darkness."

Jill nodded, it being a long time since she would do such foolish things as complain that there was no such thing of liquid light or darkness, or indeed that darkness was supposed to be an absence of light and not its own physically distinct thing. "It's very pretty."

"It is," agreed Keri, pulling back from the edge with a little jingle.

They finished crossing the bridge, stepping into a massive underground hall. Apparently this had once been the home of an advanced subterranean civilisation, but they'd delved too fast and too deep, unleashing an unspeakable evil that had dwelt far below the surface, forcing them to flee for their lives. Keri observed the

unspeakable evil, cloaked in shadow and flame, curled up around a great pillar and large enough to be visible even from this distance.

"Aww, how cute. Can I pet it?"

"Sure," Anya answered. "Those things are actually pretty docile. Dunno why the people who used to live here were so scared of it."

Keri ran forward, tail wagging excitedly behind her.

"You know, I'm not sure you did that quite right. I don't think cat tails are supposed to wag when they get excited. That's more a dog thing."

Anya shrugged. "I think it's cute, you think it's cute, Keri thinks it's cute, who cares about accuracy?"

"True."

It had been Keri's request, originally. She figured that since Anya could perform brain surgery unaided, then replacing her costume ears and tail with real cat-like ones should be child's play. Anya had disagreed; she didn't want to half-arse it, and doing it properly would require careful genetic manipulation. That had resulted in a trial run on a bunch of humans on some random world they'd found that had a bunch of different populations of humanoids, calling themselves dwarfs, elves, fairies, demons and more. *That* had resulted in the accidental creation of yet another new race to add to the planet's oversized collection, who had named themselves the beastkin, and who had been busy building a statue of Keri at the time they'd left. Jill felt a bit guilty over that bit of cultural contamination, but for all she knew, that sort of thing was where all myths about gods came from, so she couldn't get too worked up about it.

The three of them had added more friends to their group from time to time, but for some reason they never seemed to stick around long term. They always complained things were too weird, and they

couldn't cope any more. Anya didn't care; she'd worked out that being friends with someone didn't require chaining them to you, and was happy to head back from time to time and visit the acquaintances they'd made over the various worlds they'd explored.

So now here they were, the group of three, Jill and Anya watching with smiles on their faces as Keri stroked the shadowy fur of the fifty metre long unspeakable evil, which yawned in contentment, showing far too many teeth and melting quite a large patch of the cavern floor.

"Do you think we could keep it as a pet?" asked Anya.

Jill didn't dignify the question with a response. However hard she tried, there were still some areas of common sense that Anya had never quite grasped.