

# SEALING THE PALADIN'S LIGHT



KARL  
KLIM

## Sealing the Paladin's Light

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## **Chapter 1: The Child Knight**

It was a spring evening in the small town of Rose Hill, and the looming clouds were threatening a storm. All was as the bartender would have expected for this farming town. Local farmers relaxed with a mug of ale while traders and travelers rested on their way to the kingdom's capital to the west or to the thriving port city to the east. Rose Hill might not have had much to offer, but it had the best location for an inn with the fastest road to and from the capital and port cities. The local bounty hunters also stopped at the Rose Hill Inn & Tavern to warm up by the fire and hear the local gossip that might lead to a job.

As the door of the tavern opened slowly, the chatter in the room died down for a moment as bounty hunters and travelers stopped to see who had just arrived. Upon seeing that it was just a small, unassuming boy of about seven years of age, most returned to their conversations. Only the bartender continued to watch the boy. He had blond hair and brown eyes, he dressed in a simple blue shirt, gray pants, and white cape, and he had a small sword in a sheath. The boy walked over to the end of the counter, climbed onto a stool, and then closed his eyes and waited. Making no attempt to gain his attention, the bartender figured that the boy was waiting for the rest of his traveling party while they attended some matter elsewhere in town.

After awhile, when no one came to join the child, the bartender could not help thinking, *Who is this boy? Surely he is in too good a condition to be traveling alone. He seems well-fed and his clothes are well-mended. Hmm... now that I think about it, why is it that he wears a cape and not a cloak*

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*like most travelers? He has no hat to cover his head. And this small sword of his, its handle might not be elegant but it is better than what most travelers have. Then there's that small hole sewn into his cape that lets his sword come through, that's unusual as well.* Then the boy opened his eyes and turned his attention to the table closest to the fireplace. Doing the same, the bartender saw that the three who were sitting at that table were Madam Irene Rosewood, the mayor of Rose Hill and granddaughter of the town's founder, and the Riken brothers. The brothers were the best bounty hunters in town; although there were unquestionably more famous bounty hunters in the world, these two were the best Rose Hill had to offer and they were local legends for all the monsters they had slain in defense of the town and its people.

"So will you retrieve the pendant that was stolen from me?" asked the mayor in the elegant red dress.

"Do you have any idea of where we would start looking?" asked the taller of the Riken brothers.

"Yes, I know the thieves guild that took it."

"This should be easy then. Who are we looking for?"

"The Crimson Moon Bandits."

Looking shocked by this news, the Riken brothers glanced at each other; then the taller one said, "No one around here can get your pendant back, Madam Rosewood. No payment would justify opposing them."

"I see."

Just then, the boy at the bar slid off his stool and walked over to the fireside table. Looking up at Madam Rosewood he said, "Excuse me, but you said you were looking for a pendant?"

"That's right, little boy, the pendant is a family heirloom that was stolen recently. But you shouldn't worry yourself about it," came the reply in a kind voice.

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“It wouldn’t be one with a gold phoenix with a gem for an eye would it?”

Now the three sitting at the table looked surprised by the boy. Madam Rosewood looked the boy in the face and told him, “Yes, and it has three names etched into the back.”

Taking a pendant out of his pocket, the boy looked at the back of it, and said, “Hmm, it does...”

Without another word, he put it in Madam Rose’s hand and started to turn around when the shorter of the two Riken brothers stopped him and asked, “Where did you get the pendant from?”

“Two bandits were boasting about stealing it as I passed them on the road. So I knocked them out, took it, and came here to see if I could find its owner.”

Examining the boy closely, the bounty hunter asked, “Did the bandits have something in common?”

“Yeah. They were both slow, and now that I think about it, they both wore a tunic with a red crescent moon that had a red drop hanging off the end of it. Why?”

“Do you have any idea what thieves’ guild wears that crest, boy?”

“Nope.”

Once again turning to leave, the boy was stopped by another question, this time from Madam Rosewood. “Wait, little boy. Would you leave without even accepting a reward for returning my pendant?”

“I never planned on being rewarded.”

“But I wish to give this as payment for returning my family heirloom to me.”

“If you insist, Madam Rosewood,” said the boy with a sigh. As thievery was something that annoyed him to no end, he had stopped the bandits to satisfy his personal sense of

justice. He tried to play humble when discussing pay; having returned the pendant on his own, he had expected none.

“Well I insist,” she said, as she took a small silver flute with an angel engraved into the end. Handing the flute to the boy, she asked, “And to whom am I giving this special flute?”

“Alexander Guardia. What makes it special?”

“Well, Alexander dear, they say it’s magical and that its magic melody will guide you when you’re lost, but it hasn’t worked for anyone in years. Of course, the fact that no one knows the melody anymore can’t be helping.”

“Great... thanks,” Alexander said as he put the flute in a pocket concealed by his white cape. “But who are ‘they’ anyway?” Alexander asked with a puzzled look.

“No one knows, little Alexander, no one knows,” was Madam Rosewood’s reply through a giggle.

As he walked to the door leading outside, Alexander said, “Well, that’s disappointing.”

As he closed the door behind him, Alexander Guardia heard one of the Riken brother’s whisper, “Think we should go after-” before his voice became inaudible.

Without even looking back, Alexander began walking east, keeping the road well north of him. Alone as he walked through the grassy hills with the sun setting and dark clouds threatening a storm, he continued east as if oblivious to the light pitter-patter of raindrops around him. Before the rain began to come down with any force, Alexander had reached the edge of the forest. Though the trees provided fair cover from the rain, the setting sun made it impossible for Alexander to see through the infinitely dark forest shadows. Finding a suitable tree, he climbed up into the branches, lay down on a sturdy branch, and drifted off into the darkness of dreams.

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Dreams came of a dark field with nothing in sight. No land, no sea, no sky, not even stars. The only thing there with Alexander was the distant sound of a flute, a flute too far away to make out the notes of its melody. No matter what direction Alexander went, the sound of the flute never came closer, nor did it ever drift further away.

After what seemed like an eternity, the dark empty field of dreams was broken by the light of day peeking through the forest canopy. Judging from the sunlight, it was midmorning, and the birds still sung their songs to greet the day. Alexander climbed down from his treetop bed, slid a thin backpack out from behind his cape, and he pulled out some crushed bread wrapped in wax paper. After eating half of the bread, he wrapped the rest up, repacked, and resumed his eastward journey.

As morning became midday, Alexander crossed paths with several creatures of the forest, though most of the animals seemed to be wondering why a human child would be walking through the wilds when there was a beaten path just north of him. Alexander didn't seem to pay them any mind at all; that is, until he noticed that their chatter had come to a sudden halt. With this eerie silence, Alexander froze in place, waiting for the source of the animals' fears to make itself known. It wasn't long before the sounds of a large creature's footsteps broke the silence. Still, Alexander stood his ground as the distant muffled steps became a thunderous booming noise. Then a huge green lizard walked into Alexander's view. Examining the giant lizard, he saw its scaled armor hide, bright red eyes, sturdy pillar-like legs, and large scaled tail. The beast crushed a bush like it was only a blade of grass in its way, stopping as soon as it saw the little



boy in the white cape. For a moment there was total silence. Neither Alexander nor the giant lizard dared to move.

*Is this a monster or just an animal?* Alexander wondered to himself. As if in response to his thoughts, the creature opened its mouth wide and gave a tremendous roar. Alexander was troubled more by the fact that the monster lizard was big enough to swallow him whole than by the sharp row of teeth that were in its huge mouth. As the monster lizard slowly turned to face him, he quickly released the strap that kept his small sword in its sheath, and the child's sword came out.

"Definitely a monster," Alexander whispered to himself.

Then, with surprising speed, the monstrous lizard charged at him. Quickly dashing to the left, a loud crashing came from behind him. Glancing to where he had been a second earlier, Alexander saw only the closed jaws of monster lizard. Running down the length of the beast's side, he raked his sword across it and continued moving to put a few yards between the lizard and himself. Alexander turned around only to see that the lizard's scaled skin had protected it from his attack.

"So you want to play tough guy, huh?" Alexander whispered as the monster was slowly turning to face him. With the side of the monster exposed to attack, Alexander placed his left hand over his right. Wielding his sword in both hands, he made a quick dash to the monster's hind leg and, with all the strength that a little boy could summon, he began striking the monster lizard's leg. As he swung, a faint ribbon of light trailed his blade and a small glint of light flashed as he struck. After he had attacked the beast several times, Alexander backed off, panting, and examined the damage that his assault had caused while continuing to circle the lizard to stay away from its jaws.

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“You’ve got to be kidding,” he whispered as he looked at the minor scratches in the lizard’s armor-like scales. Unaffected by the string of attacks, the lizard kept trying to turn to face its attacker, but Alexander found it easy enough to circle the monster to keep himself away from the dangerous jaws that seemed so eager to have a taste of him. As Alexander was circling, he saw a boulder that was just taller than the monster lizard. With a new plan in mind, he made a dash for the left side of it. With Alexander no longer circling it, the monster lizard aligned itself to charge at him once more and that’s just what it did. Letting out a fierce roar, it charged to the left side of the boulder. However, Alexander had already run behind the boulder, and so the lizard began to go around it in a clockwise manner. After having gone around the boulder several times, the monster stopped for a moment and made a loud snorting sound as it sniffed the air for its prey. At that moment, just as it had donned on the monster where its prey had gone, Alexander jumped off of the top of the boulder. With his sword held so the blade faced downward, he thrust his sword through the monster’s right eye. As the monster thrashed about, Alexander held on to his sword, trying to pull it free of the monster’s eye. In the monster’s rage, it smashed its head against the boulder that Alexander had just leapt off, crushing Alexander against the rock. All Alexander heard was the sound of a high-pitched gasp as pain flooded through every fiber of his body and air rushed out of his lungs. The monster lizard took a few steps away from the boulder, letting Alexander slide down to the ground. It was then that the lizard seemed to realize that its prey had been incapacitated and all that was left was to go and chow down. Letting out a triumphant roar, it took a step towards Alexander. Still paralyzed by a pain so great that he couldn’t even think, let alone move, Alexander could only

watch as the beast took another step closer and let out another earsplitting roar. However, this was not a triumphant sound, but sounded more like when Alexander has struck the monster's eye.

*In fact, that's exactly what it sounds like*, he thought as he gathered the strength to look up. The monster had recoiled backward from him now, with a crossbow bolt in its other eye. Alexander looked in the direction that the bolt had to have come from to hit the monster's eye, but only saw trees and bushes.

Getting back up, Alexander thought, *Looks like I still have to finish what I started*. As he tried to move slowly around the boulder, the lizard heard his noisy footsteps and began to charge at him. In too much pain to do anything fancy, Alexander just stepped aside and let the monster lizard ram its face into the boulder. Now close enough to admire the smallest details of the monster's face, Alexander almost forgot that he was still in more pain than he thought possible.

Snapping back to reality, Alexander decided not to wait to see how long it would take for the monster's headache to go away. He slipped around the back of the boulder again and climbed on top of it. Alexander took a quick look around to see if he could find the source of the crossbow bolt one more time, but again came up empty-handed. *Whoever shot that bolt is good at staying hidden when they want to*. Alexander's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the monster sniffing the air again. The monster lizard rammed into the boulder, forcing Alexander to fall down onto all fours in order to stay on top of the rock. Then the monster seemed to remember what had happened the last time its prey got above it. But it was too late; Alexander jumped onto the monster's head. Quickly jumping down the right side of the monster's face, he grabbed his sword in the monster's eye and let

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gravity and momentum do the hard work of pulling the sword out. Landing with the monster howling in agony right behind him, Alexander started to run toward the edge of the clearing and then the pain reminded him that he wasn't in great shape at the moment. *I need to end this fight, and fast*, he thought to himself.

Turning to face the monster, Alexander spoke in a calm, yet pained voice, "Hey you. Yeah you. You big blind monster, I'm over here."

Focusing in on his voice, the monster lined up to charge at Alexander. This time it only managed to snarl at him before opening its mouth as wide as it could and charging right at Alexander. Rather than jump to the side to try to dodge the monster's attack once more, Alexander did something crazy. He wrapped his left hand over his right and, holding his little sword in both hands, he jumped into the monster's mouth, thrusting his sword upward. Having jumped past the monster's teeth when the jaws slammed shut behind him, the floor of the monster's mouth only helped Alexander's sword thrust up through the soft roof of the beast's mouth.

A few seconds later, the darkness inside of the monster's mouth was replaced by dim light trying to pierce a swirling cloud of black and purple smoke. As the colored cloud dissipated, it revealed that only the monster lizard's skeleton remained along with a glowing green gem that floated where the monster's heart should have been. Still standing in what was now the lizard's skull, Alexander watched the green gem as the glow around it faded and the gem fell to the ground. Only after the gem came to rest did Alexander lower his sword from above his head and slowly walk over to the gem, practically dragging his sword behind him. Kneeling down on one knee, he picked up the gem. As he did so, the lizard's skeleton turned from bright white bones into pure black dust

that drifted away in the gentle forest breeze, leaving the small green gem in Alexander's hand as the only proof that the monster had ever existed at all.

"You know there are better ways to kill those things," came a gentle voice. "The back of their necks don't have those tough scales," the voice continued. Slowly standing back up, Alexander looked over his shoulder to see a girl who looked to be a couple years older than him.

"I'll keep that in mind," was Alexander's response as he tossed the gem underhanded to the girl.

"What's this for? You killed it," she said, clearly caught off guard as the gem bounced off her chest as she tried to catch it.

"Your bolt saved my life. It's kinda hard to stab a monster's brain without a sword... a sword that, at the time, was still in the monster's eye."

"I see," said the girl as she bent down and picked up the gem. "Thanks then. Oh yeah, are you headed to the Rose Forest Ranger Outpost?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I live there and you seem to be off the beaten path, so I figured I could be your guide and we could head there together."

Taking a closer look at the girl, Alexander said, "Hmm... a crossbow, no sword, no daggers, and no other weapons. Are you sure you're offering to help just because I look like I could use a guide?"

"Well, I can't say that you don't look like a useful escort too," she said with a smile.

"Fair enough. Lead the way."

"Now? You don't want to rest first? You took quite the beating from that monster back there."

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“I find it easier to ignore the pain if I keep my mind busy with other things, like where I’m going.”

Staring at him in what looked like disbelief, she nodded her head. Turning away, she motioned for Alexander to follow her and said, “It’s to the east.”

Glancing up at the sunbeams piercing through the treetops, Alexander thought, *Well, at least she knows which way is east.* With that, he began to follow her.

As the two of them walked through the forest, Alexander examined the girl that was his guide. She was dressed in a red shirt that was mostly hidden by the green cloak she had, and her pants were also green. She had fingerless gloves on her hands, and her leather boots had cloth wrapped around them.

Suddenly she stopped. Walking out in front of her, Alexander stopped and turned around to face her. The hair mostly hidden by the hood of her cloak was long and brown, and her eyes were a fiery red color that somehow seemed fitting.

After these quick observations, he asked her, “Is there some reason we’re stopping?”

“No, I just realized that there wasn’t much point in me trying to be quiet when you’re walking around, making so much noise.” Taking a step backward, Alexander heard the crackling sound of dead leaves and pine needles under his boot. It occurred to him that her footsteps had made no noise at all this whole time.

“Heh, I guess you’re right”

After they had resumed their eastward trek, the girl started a conversation. “Well, seeing as there’s no point in being quiet, I suppose we can talk to each other. Starting with ‘what’s your name?’”

“Alexander Guardia. You?”

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“Lisa Firestorm. And I must admit that I was impressed with how strong you are. You take the beating of a lifetime and then you just get up and keep going.”

“Thanks. Shooting that monster’s eye the way you did was a good show of skill too.”

Then, after a short break in the conversation in which Lisa seemed to be thinking if she even wanted to ask or not, she finally said, “Are you an orphan?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah, the way you talk and act is... well, too mature.”

“I suppose so. But, when the choices are, grow up fast or die, there’s not much to do but try and act grown up. And am I correct in saying that you seem to be acting a bit old for your age too?”

“Yeah, I’m in the same boat,” she replied while her cheeks turned a shade of red. Then Lisa added, “I noticed that your ‘strength amplify’ magic was stronger than even most adult monster hunters.”

After considering commenting on the sudden change in topic, Alexander just went along with it, saying, “For young monster hunters like us, it has to be. After all, our age alone guarantees that the adult monster hunters are physically stronger, so we have to be better with magic or we could never compete with them. And seeing as there are monsters that are powerful enough to kill the adult monster hunters, it would be suicide to take on monsters if you can’t even compare with the older hunters.”

“That’s not entirely true,” said Lisa as she held up her crossbow. “My magic crossbow shoots with the same force for me as it would for anyone else.”

“True, I guess we can use magic equipment to make up for our weaknesses.”

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“That said...” Lisa demonstrated as she pulled a crossbow bolt out of her quiver and the tip burst into flames, “...I know what you mean.”

“Elemental arrow, huh? That’s a rather common one among archers.”

“Yep. Common enough that they don’t charge a small fortune to teach it to you.” Then Lisa dismissed the flame on the bolt and put it back into the quiver. “Oh, and one more thing; you keep talking as if I’m the same age as you, but you look like you’re, what, seven? And I’m nine.”

“And you think that two years makes you old enough to be as strong as an adult?” Lisa never answered the question and Alexander never pressed it, so the two of them just walked in silence for a while.

However, the silence was broken by the arrival of a four-foot tall flower with red peddles, a thorny green stem with two leaves that seemed to stand in for arms and four thorn-covered roots at the bottom instead of feet.

“They call them ‘Blood Flowers’ around here,” Lisa whispered to Alexander as she quietly loaded a bolt into her crossbow. As she aimed her crossbow, the Blood Flower turned around just in time to see a flaming bolt hit it square in the bud right between its eyes. Flames burst out, engulfing the flower’s ‘head’ as it let out a shrill cry. As the cry faded, the Blood Flower disappeared in a puff of black and purple smoke, the way only monsters died. A small bubble of light held a green gem in the air as the colored cloud faded away, just like the monster lizard. Once the light around the gem dissipated, it fell to the ground.

Alexander was about to open his mouth to congratulate Lisa on the monster kill when she grabbed him and pulled him into a nearby bush. She whispered, “They never travel alone. They usually come in groups of three to five, so when



the rest show up, you can distract them and I'll pick them off. Oh, and be careful of the roots. They use them like whips when attacking."

Looking down at his hand, Alexander realized that he had never put his sword back in its sheath after fighting the lizard monster. Three more Blood Flowers came in to view and all gathered around where the gem of the defeated Blood Flower had fallen. Alexander noticed that Lisa was looking at him with a questioning look of her face that seemed to be asking, "Well, are we doing this my way or what?"

Putting a small smile on his face, Alexander whispered, "I have a better idea."

Then, standing up and walking out of the bush, Alexander twisted his wrist a little, causing a ray of light to reflect off his sword's blade and across the face of the one Blood Flower that was facing him. The Blood Flower made a hissing sound and the other two turned around, whipping their thorny roots back and forth. Alexander ran at the closest of the three, holding his sword behind him with his right hand. When he got to his target, Alexander stepped to the left and ran past the flower. As he did so, he swung his sword forward, cutting the Blood Flower in two. Alexander only had to take one step and swing his sword back across to sever the thin stem of the second Blood Flower. Then, continuing the momentum of his last swing, Alexander spun around as he took the last two steps toward the last Blood Flower and swung his sword across the final monster, cutting it in half. Three small blasts of black and purple smoke came one right after another. Alexander sheathed his sword in the few seconds needed for the colored clouds to vanish. As the three new green gems fell to the ground, a soft clapping came from behind Alexander. With a slight smile, Alexander said, "Okay, I'm done now."

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“Done with what, I wonder? I don’t need to be told to see that you finished off the monsters.”

“Showing off. I’m done being a show off,” was Alexander’s reply.

“That’s nice to know,” came Lisa’s reply with a fair amount of sarcasm in her voice. Lisa walked over to the closest of the gems and picked it up. Alexander picked up the other three and then handed one of them to Lisa. She looked at it for a moment and then looked up at him and asked, “Do you have something against money? Or are you rich enough to be giving away yours?”

With a chuckle, Alexander said, “I just like to give my traveling companions their fair share. Especially when I try to show off.”

“Well, at least no one can accuse you of being greedy.”

With that, the two put the gems into their money pouches and continued on to the Rose Forest Ranger Outpost.

Through a break in the trees, the two came to a log wall. Turning to the left, Lisa said, “We’re here. Oh, and there is a gate this way.”

Looking down the wall in both directions, Alexander wondered, *And you know this how? Both ways look the same.* However, he kept his thought to himself and followed Lisa. Sure enough, they didn’t have to go far to come across the west gate into the Rose Forest Ranger Outpost.

As the two of them approached the gate, the guard standing there waved and greeted them. As the two young monster hunters entered the gate, Alexander saw not some small outpost, as the name would imply, but an entire town. Looking around, Alexander saw a blacksmith’s shop, several inns and taverns, a butchers shop, a medicine store, weapon and armor stores, and the homes of the locals as well. Wood

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was everywhere as most everything was made of log construction. Only some of the inns had stone foundations and even those were still made of wood after getting about four feet off the ground. Other than the inns, the only parts of the buildings that weren't made of wood were the stone chimneys that seemed to be on every house, store, inn, and tavern. Turning his eyes away from the structures of Rose Forest Ranger Outpost to its people, again Alexander saw not a small outpost but a town's worth of people going about their lives, most seemingly unaware or unconcerned with all the monsters in the forest just beyond the walls. Children played in the streets unsupervised, men went about their jobs, and the women were in the market bartering for a good price on what was to be that night's dinner. It all felt more like a small city or large town, the kind that had an army at the ready to protect it. *Wow, if all it takes is a wall and a few guards for people to feel this safe, I wonder why all the towns don't build walls around them.*

Lisa led Alexander to a three-story tall inn with a sign that read "The Forest Flower." It seemed to be the biggest inn in town and only slightly smaller than what looked to be a barracks down the way, which looked old enough to be the original outpost.

"I know the innkeeper here," Lisa said as if to answer Alexander's question before he could even ask. "So, I think I can get you a free night's stay."

"Ah. And how is it that you know the innkeeper here?"

"I work for him in the evenings and he lets me stay here in exchange for the help." At this Alexander looked skyward and saw that it was becoming late in the day.

"Come on, let's go see what I can do for you before I need to start working," Lisa said as she pushed open the door. Inside was a well-lit room with stone walls, wooden tables

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and chairs, and a bar in the back. There was an unlit fireplace on the right side of the room, a hallway on the left, and to the left of the bar were some stairs. Except for the lone man behind the bar whom Alexander figured was the innkeeper, the room was empty.

Coming around to the back of the bar with Alexander in tow, Lisa asked the man, "Ramon, this is Alexander. Do you mind if I let him share my room for the night?"

With an automatic response, Ramon said, "I've told you that I don't care what you keep in your ro—" Then he stopped and seemed to think about the question. Turning to look at Lisa and Alexander he said, "Things are slow, so just put him up in the room next to yours."

"Thank you, Ramon," she said as she took a key off a row of hooks.

Then, the inn's lull was broken by the sound of the front door opening and three men came in with the friendly greeting, "Ramon, got our usual rooms and drinks ready?"

Pulling out three mugs and setting them on the bar, he said in an equally friendly voice, "Now that would be the day, when I'm not ready for my regular customers." Then whispering to Lisa, he said, "Looks like it's time to get to work. Show your guest to his room and change your outfit."

With that, Lisa led Alexander up to the top floor and down to the far end of the hall.

Opening the door to the last room on the left, she handed Alexander the key she took off the wall behind the bar, saying, "Yours is the next one down."

Considering that he was already at the end of the hall, Alexander figured that 'down' meant back the way he had come. Sure enough, he backed up and the number on the key matched the number on the next door he came across.

Opening the door, Alexander found, what looked like to him at least, a high-class room. For a moment as he looked around, he had the sense of awe in his eyes normally seen in kids his age. The bed sat at the back of the room with its majestically carved headboard and frame, depicting a knight resting in a bed of flowers. On a stand next to the bed was a lamp shining with no flame; instead of a candle or oil, there was a small white gem at the lamp's center that gave off light. There was a ring of purple cloth around a small bronze plate above the gem so one could pull the cloth down to hide the light when desired. On the left side of the room there was a table with two chairs carved to look as if flowers had grown up and blossomed together to form a table. The chairs had been made to look as if vines had caught a falling stone, forming the legs and cushion. On the right side of the room was a dresser carved like it was a flowering bush. Most awe-inspiring were the painted walls that made the room look like it was in the middle of a forest clearing.

Eyes still bright with joy, Alexander walked over to the bed, pushed down on the mattress, and found it to be softer than anything he had ever slept on before. Then, closing his eyes, he thought to himself, *I can't just stay here for free. I need to make sure the innkeeper's kindness doesn't go unpaid.* Opening his eyes, the childish joy in them gone, Alexander walked out of the room, intent on speaking with the innkeeper. Only a step into the hall, he saw Lisa in a flowing red dress that he would have expected a lady at some noble's ball to have, especially when he saw the pendant at the end of her necklace: a golden seal with the image of a phoenix.

Without thinking the words, "You're a girl..." came out, even though he already knew this fact. Not entirely sure what had happened next, Alexander found that he was lying on the

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floor with his back propped up by the wall. Judging from Lisa's fist and the pain in his cheek, it was a safe bet that Lisa had hit him. It seemed odd to him that he didn't even catch a glimpse of her punch. *That came out poorly*, he thought. Wondering how to word what he had meant better, he came up with, "I meant that you look the part of a girl in that dress instead of that tomboy ranger outfit you had earlier."

"I think that's why Ramon has me wear this when I play waitress for him." Seeming happy with Alexander's correction, Lisa continued down the hall to the stairs, leaving him lying on the floor.

"That was interesting," Alexander whispered to himself as he picked himself up.

As Alexander came down the stairs, he found that the main tavern room had filled up with customers and had become quite lively in the short time that he had been on the third floor. Making his way even to the other side of the bar required a fair amount of effort, weaving through all the noisy people now in the room. After making it around to the back of the bar where Ramon was serving the customers, Alexander waited for a moment to talk with him.

During a lull in the activity at the bar, Alexander acquired Ramon's attention and asked him, "As nice as you have been in offering me a room for the night, I think that Lisa doesn't realize that I intend to stay in town for a while. So I was hoping that, like Lisa, I too could be of service to you in exchange for staying here as long as I remain in town."

"So, you want me to put you to work so you can stay, huh?"

"Yes, sir"

"Okay, but I do have one condition. That you don't go telling anyone about my soft spot for kids. One or two I can

handle, but I can't go around and turn my inn into an orphanage and still make a living now, can I?"

"Thank you, sir. You have my word."

"Good. Now that that's settled, I have a stack of logs around back. Thing is, they are too big as they are to make for good firewood, so I need you to them cut into fourths. And then you can tend to the fire." Looking at the handle of Alexander's sword, he continued, "If you need it, there's an ax in the shed out back too, but I don't really care how you cut the logs, as long as you cut them into fourths."

After slipping out the backdoor and into the fading light of the day, Alexander didn't have to look far to find the pile of logs and the shed that Ramon had mentioned. Alexander saw a flat stone near the pile of wood. Judging from all the scratch marks, this stone was the place that Ramon would chop the wood into smaller pieces for the fire. Drawing out his sword, Alexander held it in front of him with his left palm against the flat of the blade for a moment. As he did this, his sword began to glow with a soft white light, clearly visible without the brightness of the sun to hide his magic. By the light of the stars and his sword, Alexander chopped the wood until he was satisfied that there was enough to last the night. Then he proceeded to tend the fire for the rest of the night, cleaning whatever Ramon asked him to when the fire didn't need his attention, until the last customer had gone off to their home or their room in the inn.

With the work of the night done, Alexander left Ramon and Lisa to retire to his room, hungry and exhausted. Looking through his backpack, Alexander found only the last of his bread to eat as dinner before lying down on the bed. As he lay down, he felt something in his back pocket; pulling it out, he found it was the silver flute that madam Rosewood had given him. Once again, the small angel engraved on the end caught

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his eye as he found a place in his backpack to put the flute. Placing his backpack on the floor, Alexander then lay down on top of the bed and, without even getting under the covers, drifted off to the land of dreams. Again Alexander found himself in the empty field void of all other than himself and the sound of a flute too distant to make out its song.

At the first light of morning, Alexander awoke and, remembering the lack of food in his backpack, decided to head down to the local market before it got too busy for his liking. Taking his backpack off the floor, he slipped out as quietly as he could. As Alexander arrived at the market, most of the vendors were still setting up their stands for the morning shoppers that would soon start to trickle into the marketplace. When Alexander found a stall selling fruit, he decided that a few apples would be nice to have later. As he approached, he noticed something odd about a little piece of paper common to all of the vendor's stands. It read:

Value Chart

Red 25s, Blue 20s, Yellow 40s, Clear 50s,  
Brown 10s, Purple 15s, Sky Blue 30s, Green 5s,  
Black 1g

Looking up at the lady setting up the fruit on the stand, Alexander asked, "Are sky blue monster cores really worth 30 silver?"

Turning to face him with a gentle smile and soft voice, the lady said, "Around here they are."

"Why only around here?"

"You haven't been at it long, little hunter, have you? The value of monster core gems is determined by what monsters appear in the nearby areas. Basically the farther away for here



you have to go to find monsters that drop a certain type of gem, the more that type of gem is worth.”

“I see, thank you. And what is your asking price for the apples?”

“One silver each.”

“Then I’ll take five.” Taking out one of the green gems he got the previous day, he handed it to the lady. Under the lady’s watchful eye, he took five apples and placed them in his backpack. As Alexander started to walk away, he heard the lady thank him with the same gentle voice she had greeted him with.

After buying some bread, Alexander returned to The Forest Flower Inn and found Lisa and Ramon sitting down at one of the tables, having a plate of eggs and ham. Seeing that Alexander had arrived, Ramon gestured to the extra plate at the table and said, “Well, sit down and eat. I can’t have you working for me and not feed you now, can I?”

Alexander didn’t remember food being part of the deal but he wasn’t about to complain. A new routine began for Alexander and, to a lesser extent, Lisa, as the two of them would hunt monsters in the day and work for Ramon in the evening.

## **Chapter 2: Mystery of the Black Gem**

The new routine that Alexander had found himself in went on like clockwork for about five weeks without interruption. Now mid-spring, the mornings were warming up quicker and the nights were not as cold. On one of these warmer mornings, as he and Lisa were out hunting monsters, Alexander caught a glimpse of movement in the wood to his left. Looking in that direction, he thought he saw something unlike the monsters or animals that usually dwelt in the forests around the Rosewood Ranger Outpost. Though he only saw it for a second, this creature seemed to be a large white feline with black stripes, and he could have sworn that it was wearing armor.

“Something up?” Lisa whispered, looking puzzled as to why he had stopped.

“Do you have tigers in these woods?” Alexander answered, also at a whisper.

“Not that I’ve ever heard of.”

“I think I saw a white one over that way.” He nodded in the direction where he had seen it.

“Would you like me to track it?” asked Lisa.

Alexander nodded again and led Lisa over to the spot, and sure enough, in the dirt they found the tracks of a large catlike creature. Lisa then began to follow them through bushes and over rocks and streams. At times, Alexander thought they had lost the trail, but then Lisa would find another paw print. After an hour of tracking the elusive big cat, the young monster hunters came across something unexpected. As they entered a clearing in an unfamiliar part of the forest, they found a skeleton standing in the middle of it. Nothing seemed

to be holding the skeleton up; and stranger still, it was grasping a sword in one hand and a small, circular, wooden shield in the other.

The tiger tracks forgotten, Lisa and Alexander just stood there and examined the skeleton that was poised there before them, like a monument of the dead.

Suddenly, two red points of light appeared where the eyes would have been, and a ghostly voice came from it, saying, "Die..."

Both Alexander and Lisa were surprised to realize that the skeleton was a monster. They had heard the stories of legendary heroes that had battled necromancers with summoned armies of undead creatures at their command, but they had never heard of anything like that in the present.

As Alexander drew his sword, Lisa fired her crossbow, only to have the bolt graze one of the skeleton's ribs and continue on to strike a tree behind it. Unconcerned by the new scratch on its bone, the skeleton raised its sword and charged Alexander, bringing its sword down only to meet Alexander's sword halfway. Although Alexander did stop the skeleton's attack, it struck with far more force than he had expected from an opponent without any muscles.

"Ignore this!" came Lisa's voice. The sound of her bolt catching fire from her magic revealed what she planned to do. Then, as two swords clashed again, a flaming bolt struck the skeleton's skull. The red flames turned black for a moment before going out and the bolt itself bounced up into the air. The skeleton took a step backward, dazed by the strike, and one of its red-orb eyes focused on Lisa. Both young monster hunters took note of the crack that Lisa's bolt had made.

Alexander, trying to take advantage of this break in the skeleton's defense, thrust at it. However, even off balance, the skeleton managed to block Alexander's attack with its

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shield and countered with a thrust of its own. By sliding his sword off the skeleton's shield, Alexander deflected the attack enough to avoid harm, but his cape acquired a new hole. Dodging the skeleton's next attack by jumping to the left, Alexander saw another flaming arrow come from Lisa's direction. This time the skeleton wasn't about to let the flaming bolt hit without a challenge, and it raised its shield to block the attack. The bolt stuck in the shield, but like before, the flames turned black and went out. *So much for hopping that the shield would burn*, Alexander thought. Just then, jumping back to avoid a horizontal slash, he found the weak point that he needed.

"Next time I dodge, fire again," Alexander said. Although Lisa didn't seem to see what good that would do, she stood there with a flaming bolt at the ready, waiting for Alexander to dodge again. After blocking or deflecting five more attacks, Alexander got the horizontal swing he was looking for. Jumping back to dodge it, the skeleton's sword swung past to Alexander's left, and the monster's shield blocked the flaming bolt from the right. There was nothing left to stop Alexander's counter attack, an upward slash through the skeleton's unguarded middle. With a faint ribbon of light revealing the magic energies that Alexander was focusing into his sword, he brought it up through the skeleton with all the force he could muster. Bones shattered in the path of his sword, and the glowing red orbs of the skeleton's eyes flickered out.

As the broken bones fell, they disappeared in small puffs of pure black smoke, many before even reaching the ground. The skull blasted into another cloud, and when that had dissipated, a black monster-core gem floated in the air for a second and then fell to the ground. Both Alexander and Lisa stared at the gem in disbelief until Alexander broke the

silence, “I know they’re listed on value charts, but I’ve never seen a black one before... have you?”

“Never.” Then, after they stared at it for another minute Lisa added, “Well, are you going to pick it up or what?” With this urging from Lisa, Alexander bent down and grasped the gem. However, as he stood back up, black flames came from the gem, burning his hand, and he dropped it as quickly as he could.

“What the?” he cried with a hint of pain in his words. Wrapping his hand with his cape, the two resumed staring at the gem.

Eventually, Lisa walked over and said, “I’m not about to leave a gem worth a gold coin just lying around.” She placed her gem pouch on the ground next to the black crystal and opened it. Carefully, she picked up the black gem between her thumb and forefinger. As she moved it over her pouch, she had expected it to start burning again, but this time no black flames came from it. Turning her hand over, she then let it fall into her palm: still nothing. Using her teeth to pull the glove off her left hand, she then dropped the black gem into it, and still nothing happened. Handing it back to Alexander, she said, “Try again.” Carefully, Alexander took the gem but again the black flames came out and he dropped it to the ground.

“Hmm... why I can’t touch it?” he wondered aloud as he wrapped his hand back up with his cape.

“I don’t know, but I think I know someone who might be able to tell us.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. From time to time, I’ll tag along with the caravans that pass through going to the Harbor City of Tsumarios to the east. And I know a doctor there that seems to know a little bit about most everything. Maybe he can tell us why you

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can't touch the black core," she said as she put the black gem into her pouch.

Looking down at the shadows, Alexander said, "I hear it's a day's walk through the mountains to get to Tsumarios, so it's a bit late to leave today." Then, looking around at the grove, he added, "A bit more important is that I have no idea where we are at the moment."

"Hmm... you're right. I don't recognize this part of the forest."

Lisa climbed up the highest tree she could find and began looking around. Alexander, ever curious as to how she could always seem to find the way, climbed up after her to see what she could see. However, all Alexander could see was tree-covered hills, the high mountains to the east, and on the horizon to the west were the planes of the Rose Hill area. Other than the obvious guess that the outpost was somewhere in-between, Alexander couldn't see any sign of the outpost town.

Pointing to the south and a bit to the east, Lisa said, "There it's, behind that hill." Looking at the place Lisa had pointed out, he still couldn't see how that tree-covered hill looked any different for the other tree-covered hills.

"Then let's go. I should give Ramon a proper goodbye before I leave tomorrow."

"I? Don't you mean 'we'?"

"You plan to come with me, Lisa?"

"Of course, I want to know why you can't touch the black gem too. Plus, how are you going to find the doctor that I know without me?" That thought had not yet occurred to Alexander. Lisa then went on, "Like I said, I go there from time to time. I just tag along with a caravan, head over there, and then tag along with another one on the way back."

“I don’t plan on coming back.” Alexander said in response. At that, the two of them walked in silence in the direction Lisa had pointed out from the tree. Although Alexander wasn’t sure why, it seemed to him that Lisa didn’t know what to say about the matter. Losing himself in thought, he began to wonder if it might have been a bad idea to tell Lisa something that was clearly distracting her when she was the only one who seemed to know their way around. Nevertheless, after a couple of hours of walking, they came into parts of the woods that even Alexander found familiar.

That night when things at The Forest Flower had settled down enough, Alexander told Ramon that he would be leaving the next morning, though the conversation was mostly of him thanking the innkeeper for his kindness. Alexander found it odd that when Lisa said that she was going to help him find someone and added, “If I’m not back in three days, I don’t think I’ll be coming back.”

*That seemed odd.* He thought Lisa was content with her life in the Rose Forest Ranger Outpost, so why did it seem like she was going to just walk away from it all of a sudden? A question that, as much as it bothered him, he didn’t ask her.

Come morning, Alexander checked his backpack for his few belongings and, with everything accounted for, he put it on under his white cape and went downstairs to find Ramon and Lisa waiting. Lisa had a backpack on that was rather large for a nine-year-old, and it was packed so tightly that Alexander thought it was about to explode. Clearly, she was packing for a long trip, which made Alexander wonder if his barely noticeable, half-full backpack would suffice for the coming trip. Handing Ramon the key to the room he had been using, Alexander thanked him one last time. Having already

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said her good-byes, Lisa just followed Alexander out the door without saying anything.

Once outside, Lisa pointed to the east gate of town and then walked on, leading Alexander out of Rose Forest Outpost and along the eastward road through the mountains.

After a few hours, Lisa spoke up. “This silence is killing me. A few days ago, I saw that you had a flute. Can you play something?”

“I don’t know any songs,” Alexander replied, trying to hide a touch of embarrassment from that fact. *Why do I keep that flute around if I can’t play it?* he thought.

A moment later, Lisa said, “So make something up.”

Not able to find any words to argue with her, Alexander took out the flute and started to play as they walked along the mountain road. Although no one could say that Alexander’s song was beautiful music, the simple marching tune wasn’t half bad for having never played a flute before.

As morning gave way to day, the two young monster hunters walked east, following the twisting mountain road. The green forest gave way to the oranges and reds of the mountain rocks, and the path became more twisted as it wove in-between boulders, cliffs, and valleys. As noon approached, Alexander and Lisa were passing through a part of road with a cliff wall to the left and a deep valley to the right. They came across a large mud puddle covering the road ahead. Alexander thought nothing of it at first, but Lisa grabbed his shoulder, stopping him.

“What’s up?” he asked, ceasing to play his flute. All she did was point at the mud in the way. Before Alexander could ask what was the big deal with some mud, it began to gather together into a mound and then take human form. *Ah, I see, a monster. Oh yeah, she did say that she as been this way before, so I shouldn’t be surprised that she knows the kinds of*



*monsters along this path.* Alexander held his flute in his left hand and drew the sword with his right. The sound of a fire a step behind him told him that Lisa was ready to fight as well.

Lisa's voice came from behind with a bit of advice, "This is going to take awhile. Having no true form, it takes a lot to destroy one of these, and physical weapons don't do much." Stepping forward and ducking under the mudman's first swing, Alexander swung his sword through the monster's chest. While the strike cut through the monster rather easily, the only thing that it seemed to do was make a small amount of mud fall to the ground. That and make the seven-foot-tall mudman angry. Alexander saw half of the mud flow along the ground and return to the mudman while the other half turned into sand and blew away in the wind. Then a flaming bolt lodged itself in the monster's shoulder, causing a small amount of mud to dry into sand and fall away.

"We do this until it loses enough of its mud, then it will disappear and drop a brown core gem," Lisa said.

"I see. This will take awhile," was Alexander's response as he sidestepped a lunging attack from the mudman. With each strike, they made the mudman lose a little bit of mud, slowly becoming smaller and easier to fight. After a few minutes, the seven-foot monster had become a two-foot monster, and as one last flaming blot struck the miniature mudman, a blast of black and purple smoke hailed its defeat. As Lisa had said, it dropped a small brown monster core gem. Nodding to Lisa to take the gem, he put his flute that he had been holding throughout the fight back in his backpack.

Taking the gem, Lisa said, "They always travel alone, and seeing as you have your pack out, this is a good time to take a break and have some lunch."

They did just that, and after they had their fill, the two monster hunters continued along the way.

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Many hours of walking and three more mud monster battles later, they came around a bend in the road that revealed a cliff overlooking the ocean-port city of Tsumarios. Alexander looked down the steep mountainside between them and the city and saw that a few farms at the base of the mountains were the only structures outside of the large stone city walls. To the north of the city were a few more farms and beyond that was a wetland. Looking to the south, he saw the road they were on gently led down the mountainside for a mile or so until it was at the bottom, whereupon it turned back to the east and passed along the edge of a forest. The forest continued to the south, wedged between the mountains and the ocean as far as Alexander could see.

From their mountain cliff view, Alexander could easily see over the city walls and into the city itself. He was awestruck by the size of the port city. It seemed as if all the buildings were at least two stories tall if not three. Among the maze of buildings, three stood out. One was a lighthouse on the water's edge and far side of the city. Another tower, far more ornately decorated, rose from the center of the city, and on the north side of the city was a beautiful cathedral that rose above the surrounding structures. Alexander could only stare in amazement at the scene before him. If there had been a frame around it, he could have sworn he was looking at a work of art and not a seaside city.

"Well, are you coming? Or were you planing on standing there until nightfall," Lisa said with a sarcastic tone. Snapping back to reality, Alexander looked over at Lisa, who was a few yards further down the road. Once again, Alexander traced the path of the road as it went south down the mountain, then east along the edge of forest, and finally back north to the city. Then looking down the mountainside, he saw that the slope may have been too steep for a wagon,

but he didn't see any reason why they couldn't go down it on foot and use the dirt road in-between the farms straight to the city.

"Why don't we go straight to the city?" Alexander said as he pointed down the slope. Lisa just stared at him for a minute with her mouth open, as if she was going to tell him why they shouldn't, but then she seemed to realize that there was no reason that they couldn't.

"I guess a bit of dirt in our shoes is a small price to pay to make good time," she said as she jumped off the cliff. Landing on the slope, she started to slide down with a red glow indicating that she was using magic to keep any sharp rocks from cutting her. Following Lisa's example, Alexander jumped down the cliff onto the steep slope and the white glow of his protective magic surrounded him as he slid down with his cape flapping in the wind behind him most of the way.

As they slid down the mountainside, occasionally making a quick jump or dash over the shallow parts of the slope, the two young monster hunters couldn't help but laugh with joy at the simple childish act of sliding down a slope and making clouds of dust in their wakes. It didn't take long before they turned it into a race to the bottom of the mountain. Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the base of the mountain as the slope became far too shallow to slide any further, Lisa being the first to reach their unofficial finish line.

With his arms and legs numb as he arrived at the bottom, Alexander collapsed next to Lisa. From the looks of it, she needed a rest just as much as he did, seeing as she was lying down and staring into the clouds. Alexander, however, couldn't stay focused on the clouds for more than a few seconds before he started looking around. From the settling dust behind them, to the low hills to their left and right, and to

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the farms in the plains between them and the city of Tsumarios, Alexander kept scanning the area for potential trouble. When they had rested for a few minutes and dumped all of the dirt out of their shoes, Lisa prompted that they should continue. As Alexander got up, he noticed that she still had the same smile on her face from when she was sliding down the mountainside. *Even though she is older, she is more of a child at heart than I am*, he thought to himself.

After the two had walked a small dirt road between two farms, the young monster hunters came to a small wooden gate in the city wall. The entrance had watchtowers built in to the wall on both sides, overlooking the gate.

Lisa pounded on the gate three times and a muffled voice answered, saying, "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Then, a slit opened in the gate and a pair of eyes looked about; seeing nothing, the eyes looked down to find the two monster hunters. "A couple of monster hunters, huh?" the man said as he opened the door. "Now, stay out of trouble while you're here. Monster hunters are expected to be responsible for their actions here, regardless of their age."

"We know," was all Lisa said to the man as she casually walked past him through the gate. Alexander followed her, giving a nod to the man as he passed him. After coming out of the narrow passage between the watchtowers, Alexander saw a maze of paved streets, alleyways, and stone buildings as he followed Lisa through the city. It only took a few moments before Alexander conceded to himself that he no longer knew where they were and how to get back to the gate they had come in. But Lisa kept going, so he kept following.

As the shadows became long from the setting sun, Lisa finally came to a stop in an out-of-the-way alley. In front of them was an unusually white, one-story building. The front

door, at least he supposed it was a door, seemed odd to Alexander. It was made of a smooth metal, but the odd thing about it was that there was no doorknob of any sort, and yet this metal slab was the only feature on the building. Lisa walked up to the metal door and raised her hand to knock on it, but it suddenly slid away into the wall, opening the way inside. The doorway revealed a middle-aged man with brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and wearing a long white coat.

“Lisa? What brings you here?” was his greeting.

“Same thing as always, Doctor Lancer: questions that no one else can answer.”

“Then come in! What is it I can help you with this evening?”

With that, the doctor showed his two guests in and pulled out some chairs by the table. He and Lisa sat down facing each other while Alexander just stood in the middle of the room and looked around the odd place. The walls were even whiter on the inside than the outside, and everything was so smooth. The place just didn't feel right to him; like it was *too* perfect. There were no mended cracks and the place seemed to lack a smell, as if nothing lived there. Looking about, Alexander saw a strange chair on the far side of the room with several trays attached to it. In the trays were strange tools, the likes of which he had never seen before. Near the chair was a desk that caught his eye; it was made of the same smooth metal as the door. An “L”-shaped tool sat on the desk all alone. Although Alexander had never seen any of the tools in the room, something inside told him that the object on the desk was especially different from the others and that something about it was dangerous.

His attention was drawn back by the conversation Lisa and the doctor were having at the table.

“Found something from a strange monster, huh?”

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“Yes, a black monster core gem that Alexander can’t pick up.”

“Why can’t he pick it up?”

“See for your self.”

Standing up, Lisa took the black gem out held it over the table, and nodded to Alexander to take it. Walking over to the table, he climbed up onto a chair and took the gem from Lisa, and the black flames shot out of the stone as before, the pain causing him to drop it onto the table.

“Amazing!” Doctor Lancer exclaimed.

“Amazing, huh? It hurts quite a bit you know,” Alexander said, trying not to let them see just how much his hand hurt now.

“Well, how do I put this...” Doctor Lancer pondered for a moment. Then, after gathering his thoughts, he went on. “Monsters are made from the negative energies produced from human suffering: hate, despair and the like. But, these energies alone aren’t enough to make a monster appear; so, these energies tend to combine with the energies of the surrounding areas. This is why you will find more, or stronger, monsters in the areas around cities than in the wilds. Anyway, when the dark energies combine with the energies of the area, the monster takes on an elemental alignment suitable to the area. Like the earth alignment of the monsters in the mountains, or the nature alignment of monsters in a forest.”

Everyone looked at the black gem on the table, and then Alexander asked, “So, what are all the elements and colors?”

“A good question, and one that I can answer,” said Doctor Lancer. Then he continued, “There are ten elements, which are divided into three categories. First are the basic elements, and they are fire, as represented by the red gems; ice, which is blue, lightning, the yellow gem; and then neutral or non-

elemental magic, which are the clear gems. Then you have the advanced elements, and these are earth, the brown; water, the purple; wind, the sky blue; and nature, the green.”

Then the Doctor stopped again, as if waiting for the next inevitable question. That question came from Lisa, “You said ten elements, but you only listed eight. What are the last two?”

“Yes, the two ultimate elements, Darkness and Holy. The black gem and angel diamond respectively.”

The three of them again looked at the black gem lying on the table for a moment, until Alexander broke the silence, “Okay, I see why you might say the gem is amazing, but I still don’t see how this explains why I can’t touch it.”

“That’s simple really. Alexander, right? Well, humans have an elemental alignment too. Our alignment is a bit harder to predict than a monster’s, but it seems to have something to do with personality and or family line. Sometimes an elemental alignment runs in a family, such as I know to be Lisa’s case. I know that her family has had a fire elemental alignment for at least the last three generations; that’s why the family name became ‘Firestorm’ somewhere along the line. Other times, however, a person’s personality seems to have more to do with their alignment. For example, the calm, logical types seem to have an ice affinity, while those with a short temper are likely to have a fire affinity. But for some, the alignment seems to be totally random. Whatever the cause, the three categories of magic are based on how rare that alignment is among humans.”

“As interesting a lesson as this is, I still don’t see the connection to why I can’t touch the black gem.”

“Well, let me put it this way. The same thing would happen to Lisa if she tried to touch a purple gem.”

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“Purple? What would a water gem have to do with anything?”

Giving a laugh, the Doctor said, “You just want me to tell you everything, don’t you? Okay then, how’s this? Fire fears water, water fears lightning, lightning fears wind, wind fears earth, earth fears ice and ice fears fire. This is the basic ring of elemental strengths and weaknesses. Then, neutral is... well, neutral and nature is situational, fearing different elements based on the creature or force the monster or spell is emulating.”

The answer dawning on him, Alexander said, “That only leaves holy and dark. Or put another way, light and dark, two polar opposites... so, you’re saying that I have a holy elemental magic affinity?”

“Bravo, kid, bravo!” Doctor Lancer said, clapping his hands together. Standing up, he said, “And now you’re wondering, ‘what do I do now that I know this?’ Well, fear not, my child knight, I know just the person you need to see!”

*Why does he sound like merchant selling something?* Alexander wondered as he and Lisa looked at each other, only to see that the other was just as puzzled.

Then Doctor Lancer grabbed Alexander by the shoulder and quickly made for the door, and Alexander stumbled to keep up with the suddenly energetic man. Lisa jumped up from her chair, grabbed the black gem off the table, and followed the two out into the evening.

The streets were almost empty now, and the last light of the day was fading as Doctor Lancer led Alexander through the city with Lisa close behind. Coming out of the maze-like alleys onto a main road in the city, they followed the street to a huge cathedral. Examining the cathedral as they approached, Alexander recognized it as the one he saw earlier



from the cliffs overlooking the city. Now up close, he could see the magnificent stain glass windows and the angelic statues that decorated the outside of the structure. The doors of the cathedral were made of wood and had the image of three angels. One angel was kneeling down with a sword in one hand. Another had its hand outstretched, healing an injured knight. The last stood over a fallen demon, holding a scale.

As he reached the doors, Doctor Lancer knocked. As his fist hit the door the second time, the door was already being opened and it revealed a man dressed in simple black pants and shirt with a white collar.

“Father, I have brought-” Doctor Lancer began

“I know. ‘He’ told me of your coming tonight,” the priest interrupted

“Good, that saves me the trouble of explaining then.”

“Indeed. Come this way, Alexander,” the priest said in a soft voice.

Although Alexander was troubled by this sudden turn of events, he quietly followed the priest through the cathedral and past rows of pews. His mind raced, wondering, *How does this guy, priest or not, know my name, and who is this ‘he’ that knew we were coming?* Turning his head to whisper this question to Lisa, he saw that Doctor Lancer and Lisa weren’t following but had sat down in the pews near the doors.

Then the priest led him past the altar and to a hallway off to the side. In the hall, they passed several doors that had labels on them like “Classroom 1” and “Office” until they came to an unmarked door. The priest opened it and led Alexander down a spiral staircase. Once at the bottom, they came out of the staircase into a fairly large room covered by a white carpet with blue speckle. The walls were adorned with

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light blue cloth that seemed to glow with an unnatural yet soothing light. Opposite the staircase was a set of golden double doors with the same images as the main doors of the cathedral.

The priest walked to the middle of the room, turned to Alexander and said, "He is waiting beyond those doors." The priest motioned to the golden doors. Walking toward them, Alexander wondered if he would be able to open the doors by himself. As if in response, the doors swung open on their own.

As Alexander walked through the doorway and into the light blue clad hall beyond it, he noticed that the hall was leading him to a spot directly underneath the altar of the cathedral above. *Why am I here? Why am I going along with all this weird stuff?* he thought as he glanced back the way he had come. Then with a sigh, he gave in to curiosity and continued down the hall to see just who this 'he' the priest spoke of was.

At the end of the hall, Alexander found himself standing before a very bland wooden door. Unlike the golden doors at the start of the hall, the plain wooden door had nothing special about it: no designs, no paintings, no windows, just seven planks of wood with a handle on one side.

He stepped into a stone room that looked more reminiscent of a dungeon than a cathedral, the only exception being a blue curtain in the back that seemed to divide the room from something. The 'he' the priest spoke of stood in the middle of the room with his back to Alexander. It turned out to be an angel like the ones depicted in the image on the golden doors: standing seven feet tall, head flowing with short silvery hair, wearing a light blue robe, and possessing two shimmering white wings.

“So, you’ve come,” the angel said with a voice much like that of the priest.

“So I have. But who are you?” Alexander asked the angel as respectfully as his choice of words would allow.

Turning around to face Alexander, the angel answered, “I am the Keeper of Healing Light and the first guardian of the paladin’s shrines.”

Alexander had heard stories of the mortal champions of Heaven known as paladins and seen statues and monuments that had been built to honor them. However, for the life of him, he couldn’t remember any of the stories being set less than ten years ago.

“Are you asking me to become a paladin?” he asked after a long silence.

Looking closely at Alexander, the angel replied, “Your face shows determination, your hands glow with justice, your heart shines with kindness, and your soul shimmers with hope. Yes, you would be a great paladin! So yes, I suppose I am asking you to accept my challenge and take the first step in becoming a paladin.”

*Great... I just wanted to find out why I couldn't touch the black gem and now I have an angel asking me to try and become the kind of guy that legends are made from... For a moment, the idea of being a hero like all the paladins in the stories he had heard was tempting. But then he remembered that in all the stories, those paladins faced horrific foes and had to overcome seemingly impossible odds. Being a monster hunter is hard enough. Do I really want to make my life that much more difficult by having everyone expecting me to be some great paladin? Looking up at the angel, Alexander saw that he was waiting patiently for a response with a look that seemed to say, “Take your time, child.” Dang, how do you*

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*say 'no' to an angel? Anyone with a shred of decency would do anything for someone that represents the will of Heaven.*

“What if I become a paladin and decide I don't like it?” Alexander finally said.

“The first step is far from the last. Even if you pass my challenge, you will still be able to decide if the paladin's path is a path you wish to follow.”

*He just has an answer for everything, doesn't he? Well, I can't argue with that, but I could just take his test and fail on purpose.* “Fine, I'll try your challenge.”

“Very well, little one,” the angel said with a smile. Then, with the wave of his arm, the blue curtain in the back shimmered and disappeared, revealing a machine in the middle of the back wall and a lava pit in the right corner. Alexander was startled to see a cage above the lava pit with Lisa in it. “The rules of my challenge are simple: you have five minutes to defeat me before the cage reaches the lava.” The temperature in the room went from perfect to uncomfortably warm. Looking back at the angel, Alexander saw that the angel's robes were now gone, replaced by a suit of light armor and a sword was now in his right hand.

“Lisa? Are you okay?” Alexander asked.

“What does that matter? You already accepted the challenge, didn't you?” she replied with immense sarcasm. “Just kick his butt real quick and let's get this over with,” she added.

*So much for failing on purpose,* Alexander thought as he drew his own sword. He nodded to let the angel know he was ready. As the angel nodded back, the gears of the machine came to life and the cage began a snail's crawl downward.

“Strike with all your might. Worry not for my safety, for nothing you can do will truly harm me.”

“Good,” Alexander replied. With that, he charged his opponent.

The angel easily deflected a swift thrust, and Alexander found the broad side of the angel’s sword slammed against his chest, knocking him backward. *Dang, he’s fast!* Alexander thought, picking himself up off the floor. His next attempt went much better, seeing as he managed to dodge and block the angel’s counter attacks several times before finding himself being knocked to the floor again.

As the battle continued, Alexander noticed that the angel never made the first move, always allowing Alexander to rest and think after getting knocked down. But no matter what he tried, he couldn’t even scratch the angel’s armor, let alone land a real blow. The angel’s sword blocked and countered every move he could come up with, and no matter how long he managed to block or dodge the angel’s counter attacks, Alexander always found himself on the receiving end of a broad-sided trip to the floor.

After getting up again, Alexander heard Lisa’s voice say, “Can you hurry up? It’s getting hot over here.”

Glancing at the cage, he saw that Lisa had climbed up and was now hanging from the bars on the top of the cage. With the floor of Lisa’s cage only inches from the lava pit, Alexander knew he had to do something fast. *There is no way I can beat this guy in time... time... yes! That’s it! I need more time!* Charging the angel again, he jumped to the left and swung at the angel on his right. Though his swing was blocked, he didn’t care or even stop charging for that matter. He ran right past the angel and to the back of the room, thrusting his sword in-between the two largest gears he could see. The machine jammed as the gears closed on the sword and came to a halt. A quick glance proved that Lisa’s cage had also stopped its slow decent. Turning to the angel, ready

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to fight with nothing but his bare hands, Alexander was surprised to see that the angel's sword had vanished and the angel was now gently clapping.

"Well done, young champion," the angel said softly. "You have passed my challenge. You have shown that you value the safety of your allies over the destruction of your enemies."

"Say what?" Alexander said, completely befuddled.

"You thought I said you had to beat me in a fight? How would that prove anything? Anyone can pick up a sword and learn to fight. But you have shown that your heart is in the right place to learn how to fight like a paladin!"

The sound of lava cooling brought Alexander's attention to the cage just in time to see Lisa shimmer and disappear.

"Where did you send her!" he demanded from the angel.

"Come now, doesn't it strike you as odd that I, an angel, a servant of Heaven, would risk the life of an innocent bystander *just* to test you?"

"Well, when you put it that way, yes... but what are you getting at?"

"She was a magically created illusion," the angel said bluntly. "The real Lisa was never here and is ignorant to the events that have transpired," he added, holding his hands in front of his chest with their palms facing each other. As he did this, an orb of swirling blue light formed in-between. "Now, receive the aura of healing light!" Then thrusting his hands forward, the angel sent the orb of light at Alexander.

Alexander took a step back in hesitation, having been caught off guard by this sudden act. The orb hit him in the chest and his senses were flooded by years of memories that were not his own. Memories of training at a temple he had never seen before. Memories of learning to bend the energies of his spirit to form a field of healing magic. Then, as

suddenly as the memories had filed his senses, they stopped and he found himself sitting on the floor, looking up at the angel.

“Well, now that you’ve seen how it’s done, give it a try,” the angel prompted him. Bowing his head and closing his eyes, Alexander imagined an image of himself surrounded with an aura of light to represent the energies of his spirit. He imagined making those energies match the pattern he had seen in the memories a moment ago. As he did this, a soothing feeling came over him, and the aches and pains from the battle he had just fought vanished. Holding his focus of maintaining the aura, he opened his eyes and saw that several tiny orbs of pale blue light were appearing all around him and then floating inward. When they touched his clothes, the orb spread out gently and he felt a soothing sensation unlike any he had ever known before. When the light faded from that spot, the feeling of healing magic also faded; however, as it did, several more of the tiny orbs touched him, shifting the healing to elsewhere. After a few moments, Alexander had been completely healed by the little blue spheres. Alexander stood up, still maintaining the aura of healing light.

The angel said, “Good, but healing yourself is only a small part of the aura of healing light. Now, extend the field of healing out to me.”

Outstretching his hand toward the angel and again mimicking the memories given to him by the angel’s spell, several small blue orbs began appearing around the angel and did the same for him as they were for Alexander.

“Good,” the angel said, waving his hand and causing an image of a knight to appear behind him. “Now, heal the illusion behind me without healing me.” After a moment of trying, Alexander managed to accomplish this too.

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“There, now you know the basics of using the aura of healing light. You can heal yourself and all your allies within range of you and not waste your energies healing those you deem your foes. No doubt by now, you can feel the strain from holding this technique for a prolonged time. But if you practice with this aura, you will find that in time you will be able use the aura of healing light on a whim and be able to hold it as long as you please.”

Listening to this, Alexander could feel a strange weakness that was like being tired without his body feeling weary, a feeling that he knew was from the overuse of magic. Sure enough, even though he tried to hold on to the aura of healing light, it stopped working.

Then the angel said, “You may go now. As I said, if you decide that you wish to walk the path of a paladin, then return to me and I will tell you where to look to continue. However, know that the next step is the point of no return. The power to use holy magic to heal is taught to all with enough kindness in their hearts to make healing magic work. But should you pass the trial you find at the next step, you will gain that which is taught only to paladins. So only ask to continue if you are ready to devote your life to becoming a paladin and serving Heaven as one.”

With that, Alexander bowed to the angel, turned around, and walked out of the room. Closing the door behind him, Alexander heard the voice of the angel through the wooden door.

“How long have you been watching?” he addressed to the unknown guest. Then, a new voice whispered too quietly for Alexander to make out the words through the door. Alexander leaned close for a moment, hearing the angel say, “And you think he’ll...”



*Karl Klim*

Then Alexander pulled himself away, thinking, *If he had meant for me to hear that conversation, he would have called out his unseen guest before I left.* Turning his back to the door, Alexander continued down the hall, leaving the sounds of the angel's conversation behind while reaffirming his choice. *Besides, it's none of my business what angels do. I'm just a monster hunter; I have nothing to do with Heaven's business... do I?* Lingered on that thought, Alexander just realized that he was more confused than he could ever remember being before. Standing in the middle of the hall, he ran through the events of the last few minutes in his head over and over again, trying to make sense of it all. Though still not sure how it had happened, in the end Alexander figured he should be happy. Because somehow, a simple question about a monster core gem ended with learning a new magic skill for free; seeing as most magi would charge a small fortune to teach someone a new magic spell, it was a great deal.

### **Chapter 3: Leo's Monster Hunters**

Emerging from the hall, Alexander found the priest was waiting to lead him back to the main cathedral where Lisa and Doctor Lancer were seated. After returning to the main room of the cathedral and meeting up with them, the group of three headed to the front door.

A now familiar voice came gently from behind, "It is quite late for our young travelers, and I know that you do not yet have a place at any of this city's inns. So, I invite you to stay in a room I have prepared for you here."

Turning around, Lisa gave a quick glance to see who this new speaker was and then did a double take when she realized it was an angel. Doctor Lancer seemed more used to speaking with such a being.

Alexander, having just been in his presence, simply gave a respectful bow as Doctor Lancer replied, "Good idea. As always, my place isn't very suitable for guests at the moment, so it would be best if you were to stay here." He directed this last part at Alexander and Lisa. However, Lisa seemed at a loss, not only for words, but thoughts. It was obvious that she had no idea how she was supposed to behave in the presence of an angel. It seemed Alexander wasn't the only one to notice this.

"Relax, child," the angel said to Lisa in a most soothing tone of voice.

"Yes, Sir," Lisa managed to choke out, moving for the first time since she saw the angel. With a smile, the angel motioned for the two young monster hunters to follow.

The angel then proceeded to lead Alexander and Lisa back down the way Alexander had just come. They went all

the way to the room in which the priest had waited while Alexander had met with the angel the first time. However, now the room wasn't empty, and instead there were two beds and a small table in it. The table in the middle of the room was short enough that one would only need to sit on the floor to use it properly. The beds were on opposite sides of the room. A new curtain hung bundled above the table with a string that seemed to be used to raise and lower it to divide the room in two when desired.

Standing in front of the golden doors at the back of the room, the angel turned around to face his young guests, saying, "You must be tired and hungry after such a long journey. Eat your fill and rest for the night. Then I'm sure you wish to be on your way tomorrow." After he said this, he smiled and waved his hand, causing golden rays of light to spring forth seemingly from nowhere and converge into several bright spheres on top of the table. As the light faded, two plates of food and two glasses of drink now sat on the once-empty table. With that, the angel turned around and left through the golden doors which opened and closed on their own.

Alexander then walked over to the left side of the table, and sitting cross-legged on the carpet, took the plate and glass nearest him, and began to eat some kind of fruit he had never seen before. Lisa remained motionless for at least a minute before finally walking over to one of the beds and dropping her backpack off at its foot. Then she came over, sat opposite Alexander, took the remaining plate and glass, and began her own dinner. As Alexander moved on to some from of what he thought looked to be cake, it occurred to him that Lisa was still being unusually quiet.

"You haven't said much since we got here. What's on your mind?"

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“Hmm? Oh, well I was wondering what do we do now? You know, now that we got what we came here for and a little more actually. So, what now?”

Not sure if he thought getting Lisa to speak again was a bright idea, Alexander had to resign to himself that he had no real plan beyond this point. Nevertheless, making one up on the spot, he answered, “Well, I figured I’d see what a young monster hunter can do around this city for work, and then see what’s what around here. You know, see what’s in a port city. That sort of thing.”

“I see. A tour of the city then, is it?” Lisa seemed to like the idea. After they had both finished eating, Lisa lowered the curtain separating the two beds from view of each other and the two young monster hunters went to sleep.

It didn’t take long for Alexander to fall fast asleep. In fact, he had only taken off his backpack and lay down before leaving the waking world for the world of dreams.

Alexander found himself in the dark field he had come to expect once again, but something had changed. The darkness was no longer perfect; he counted twenty-one tiny points of light scattered around him. The points of light were all around him like distant stars. Though he still couldn’t make out the flute’s song, he could have sworn that it seemed a little closer or louder. Hoping that having something to see in this new version of the dream might allow him to go somewhere, Alexander soon found that, like the flute’s song, the points of light never got any closer or further, no matter how long he walked or ran towards any of them. Alexander’s dream-self finally conceding defeat, he waited for morning to come and once more shatter this strange dream that came to him every time he fell asleep.

Morning came to the sound of an angel lifting the curtain and saying, "I'd tell you to wake up and get dressed, but it seems that both of you never even bothered to slip under the covers."

Glancing across the room, Alexander saw that Lisa was also just lying on her bed, still fully dressed minus her backpack. She even had her crossbow still on. Then, it occurred to Alexander that he still had his sword strapped to his back too. So the two of them just grabbed their backpacks, slid them on, and stood up, awaiting for the angel to lead them somewhere or dismiss them, the latter being what happened. After being dismissed, Alexander and Lisa thanked the angel for letting them stay and made their way to the front door of the cathedral.

Stepping out in to the cool morning air, Alexander looked about the plaza in front of the cathedral. The first thing he noticed was the fountain in the middle of the plaza that he missed the night before. It was a statue of a knight clad in plate armor raising a sword to the sky. From the sword came a fountain of water shooting up a little and then coming down in a thin veil around the knight. The veil of water then ran into a circular basin, and seven small angel figurines evenly spaced around the rim decorated the otherwise bland pool. After the fountain, Alexander saw that there were only a few early risers about the streets walking quickly, going one way or another with a sense of purpose.

"So, where are-" Lisa began to say when something caught Alexander's eye. A white tiger clad in white and blue armor sat in one of the alleys to their right. As soon as he had seen the tiger, it got up and began to walk down the alley.

Alexander burst into a sprint after it, thus causing Lisa to cut short her inquiry and come running after him. As Alexander made it to the beginning of the alleyway, he could

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only see the tip of the tiger's tail as it rounded a corner to the left, about halfway down the alley. Rushing to catch up, he rounded the corner just in time to see the tiger's tail disappear to the right into another alley.

"Mind telling me what we are running through alleyways for?" Lisa's voice came from behind.

"Remember the tiger we tracked in Rose Forest? Well, I think it's following us. I just saw it go this way!" As they rounded another corner, he caught a glimpse of the whole tiger and half of it was still visible as Lisa caught up. "See it?" he asked.

"Yes, this time I did," she said as they ran down to the spot where they had seen it turn. But when they rounded the corner, they found not a tiger, but a boy. He appeared to be around eleven years old, had blond hair, and was dressed in a light blue robe with dark blue designs and silver trim. Alexander would have laughed at the boy's choice of clothes if it weren't for the fact that the boy wasn't alone. Standing about twenty yards further down the alley from the boy was a skeleton that looked remarkably like the one Alexander and Lisa had fought in the forest. Lisa stopped as soon as she saw the skeleton. Alexander only hesitated for a second while he took in the scene before him and then dashed toward the fight in the alleyway before him.

The boy in the robe thrust his fist at the air in the direction of the skeleton and a blue light surrounded his hand. At the end of his punch, an icicle came out of the glow surrounding his fist. The skeleton raised its shield and blocked the magical ice attack with relative ease, reminding Alexander of how easily the one in the forest dealt with Lisa's fire arrows.

*They are strong against ice magic too,* Alexander thought as he drew his sword, still closing the distance to the fight. The skeleton began to advance toward the robed boy, but he

was now performing an uppercut punch with a more noticeable aura of the cold blue light around him. As the robed boy did this, several rectangular pillars of ice shot up out the ground in erratic places between him and the skeleton, effectively barring its path. *Wow he's good!* Alexander thought. Shifting his gaze from the battle down the alley to Lisa, Alexander nodded to her, seeing that she had anticipated his plan. Looking back to the front, Alexander saw the young mage standing very still as a torrent of the ice blue energies which seemed to grow more powerful with every second appeared around the caster. Not sitting and waiting to see what its intended prey had in mind with that much magic energy, the skeleton was smashing the ice pillars with its sword. Only a few yards from the robed boy, the undead warrior smashed the last pillar of ice with such force that icy shards went flying at the young caster, cutting both his robe and skin in places. Motivated by the pain, the young mage suddenly moved again, swinging his arms to the front. As his hands passed, the vortex of ice magic energy jumped off the boy and formed into several icicles in the air before him. Then the icy barrage was let loose on the skeleton, shattering on its shield, skull, ribs and any other bone on the skeleton they touched. Though the force of the magic assault caused the undead monster to stagger back several steps, it remained standing and managed to right itself after a few seconds.

"You're joking," the robed boy muttered with clear concern in his voice. He was otherwise composed as the skeleton began marching menacingly toward the young mage. Then the two new monster hunters, which neither the young mage nor the undead monster had noticed, made their presence known to both. As Alexander dashed past the boy in the robes, Lisa's flaming bolt went screaming over their heads, smashing into the undead monster's skull. Knocked off

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balance by Lisa's attack, the skeleton never had a chance to react to Alexander's appearance. He slashed the creature in two at its waist as his momentum carried him past the undead warrior. As the bones fell to the ground, Alexander spun around and made another horizontal slash, cutting the monster's falling skull and causing it to burst into a puff of pure black smoke. Almost immediately, the remaining bones of the monster followed suit and vanished in blasts of black smoke.

As the smoke cleared, a black gem fell from where the skeleton's skull had been. Alexander didn't even pay the gem a passing glance. Rather, he looked into the icy blue eyes of the boy in robes and then at the various cuts from which the young mage was bleeding. Without a second thought, Alexander brought his free hand up in front of him as if tightly clutching a small object. As he did this, the aura of healing light formed around him and jumped onto the boy standing in front of him a second later.

The boy in blue robes looked up from the black gem and examined the magic that was now healing him. The robed boy stared at Alexander with an expression of one lost in thought during the next few moments of silence.

Breaking the silence, Alexander finally asked, "You alright?"

Returning from his thoughts, the robed boy glanced over his quickly healing wounds and replied, "I am now thanks to you and your friend." He gave a small bow out of respect.

"I don't suppose you saw anything unusual come this way a just before we showed up?" Alexander asked, remembering why he and Lisa were in the alley in the first place.

"Actually, yes! While I was fighting the skeleton, I did sense something rush past, above me, but I when I glanced to see what it was I saw nothing. Unfortunately with that



skeleton around, I wasn't able to give the occurrence an extensive investigation."

"Thanks..." Alexander said, glancing down at the black gem for a moment, and then he added, "You can take the gem if you like." The look on Lisa's face quickly revealed she wasn't thrilled with this idea.

As she opened her mouth to protest, the boy in blue robes replied, "Thank you for the offer, but it was rather obvious that the monster was extraordinarily resistant to my ice magic. In fact, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I was about to turn tail and run when you dashed past me."

"Fine. Lisa, go for it." Lisa, who had just closed the distance from her firing spot at the end of alleyway, walked over and took the black gem.

"Oh, right!" said the boy in the blue robes, giving a bow as he introduced himself, "You can call me Roy."

"Alexander Guardia."

"Lisa Firestorm."

"I see, and what might you be up to in Tsumarios?" Roy asked them. Alexander had no true answer to the question and he glanced to Lisa, only to find that it seemed she too wanted to know what the plan was as well.

"Well... we just got in last night and haven't had a chance to look around. You know, see what's where, and that kind of thing," Alexander said, hoping his delayed reaction didn't make it too obvious that he was making up the plan as he went.

"Ah, need a tour of the city then? Well, seeing as you just helped me out and I've nothing better to do at the moment, how about I show you around?" It didn't look as if Roy would take 'no' for an answer, and Alexander didn't see anything wrong with the idea, so he agreed to let Roy be their guide through the city.

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As they went along, Roy showed Alexander and Lisa most of the shops, inns, bars, which were the best place for monster hunters to find jobs, historical land marks, the port, and the Magi's Tower, which Roy seemed particularly fond of when he pointed it out. It also quickly became apparent that Roy knew a great deal about the city. Moreover, from his manner, Alexander guessed that Roy knew about lot more than just the city. He came across as a well-educated kid, not just in magic, but in general.

Roy concluded the daylong tour of the city by saying, "Well, that's everything I can think of that might be worth knowing about this city. So on that note, might I ask where you were planing on lodging tonight?" Looking at the slight orange tint on the city around them, Alexander realized that they had spent all day exploring the city.

"Well, we hadn't really had the chance to work that out," he replied.

"Then don't worry about it," Roy said, kindly adding, "You can stay at my place. There is someone that I think would like to meet you there, and I don't think he would object to letting you stay the night." Alexander looked at Lisa, who didn't seem to care how he answered, so he gave a nod. Rather pleased, Roy showed them to the main city gate, explaining that the house was just outside the city itself and about how he and his friend had fixed up the previously abandoned home.

Leaving the city behind, they walked south, following the road as it turned to the west along the forest's edge. Then Roy turned south again, leaving the road and walking into the woods. Looking into the forest from the road, Alexander could see a few slivers of a house through the trees. *If you didn't know it was there, you'd never see that house from the road*, he thought as he and Lisa followed Roy into the woods.

Approaching the house, they saw that it was a strange mix of old and new. Old and new planks of wood made up the walls, and the door had seen many years while the windows had only seen a few seasons. The house had originally been two stories tall, but now only the first floor remained, along with what looked like a ramp on the top. Alexander figured that was where the stairs came up to the now non-existent second floor.

Roy opened the front door and showed his guests into the main room of the house. Looking around, Alexander saw that there was a staircase on the right side of the room and two doors beyond it at the back. One of the doors was closed while the other was open, allowing Alexander to see some of a rather messy bedroom. The main room itself had a table with a couple chairs around it, a couch facing a stone fireplace, and a metal stove in one corner. Sitting at the table was a brown-haired, brown-eyed, ten-year-old boy dressed in chain mail, armed with a sword and sheath strapped to his back. Through the chain mail armor, Alexander saw bits and pieces of a yellow shirt and gray pants, but the dull silver of his armor dominated his color scheme.

“So, Roy, who are the new kids?”

“Leo, this is Alexander and Lisa. Lisa, Alexander, this is Leo.”

“Welcome aboard then. And your timing couldn’t be better,” Leo said with a smile.

“Just what’s that suppose to mean?” Roy asked with a tone of distaste in his voice.

“Hope you feel like trying our luck in the marshes again.”

“You know that the monsters there travel in packs of at least eight, usually ten! That’s more than the two of us can handle.”

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“Well, I told farmer Prigen we’d kill twenty of them to scare them away from his farm for awhile.” Then Leo looked over the new arrivals and continued, “With their help, it would be a manageable job.”

Roy seemed to be having a hard time keeping himself from shouting at Leo when he replied, “I invited them to stay awhile, not to go on dangerous bounty hunting jobs with us!” Then pausing for a moment he added, “How much *did* farmer Prigen offer for the job anyway?”

“From the looks of it, they are hunters themselves, and two gold,” Leo said, covering both of Roy’s concerns.

Hanging his head in defeat, Roy turned to Lisa and Alexander and reluctantly asked if they would assist them in the endeavor but pointed out that his offer to stay was good regardless if they helped out or not. Alexander felt a bit relieved to do something to earn his keep and agreed. Lisa didn’t answer but didn’t seem to care when Leo took Alexander’s reply to be for the both of them.

Roy then asked Lisa, “You said your name was Lisa Firestorm. So, am I correct in assuming that you have a family affinity for fire magic alignment?”

“Yes, that’s right. What of it?”

“The monsters at the marsh are all of water alignment, so you’ll need a diffuser glove. Do you have one?” Before she could say anything, the baffled look on her and Alexander’s faces said it all. Therefore, Roy continued, “A diffuser glove is an enchanted glove that allows a person of one alignment to handle monster core gems for their alignment’s weak point. In this case, fire magic fears water magic.” Roy pulled out a cloth glove made of two colors, red and blue, with a gem imbedded in back of its hand. He continued, “In my case ice magic fears fire magic, so I need this to handle red monster cores. However, these gloves need to be made for each magic

type, so mine won't do you any good. That said, I do know a shop where we can get one for you," he said, directing that last comment at Lisa.

"Alright, let's go," Lisa agreed. Roy whispered something in to Leo's ear and left with Lisa in tow.

After Roy and Lisa had closed the door, Leo revealed what Roy had whispered to him by asking, "So, Roy tells me you are a paladin. Is that true?"

Alexander was completely caught off guard by the question and just stood there, wondering how to answer. Ultimately, he came up with, "Not really. The angel at the cathedral said to come back if I wanted to become a paladin." Thinking on it a bit more, he added, "But how did Roy know that I had been offered the chance to be a paladin?"

"Don't know. He's clever that way. Always seems to figure everything out." This seemed to get Leo thinking of something else for a moment but he came back to the paladin topic when he opened his mouth again. "An angel offered to teach you to be a paladin and you *didn't* say 'yes'? If I had that chance, I'd take it in a heartbeat! How come you haven't gone back yet? What's it like to talk to an angel?" More questions came that Alexander didn't hear because he was still trying to come up with answers for the first ones. Alexander spent the next hour or two answering Leo's excited questions about meeting the angel, that Alexander hadn't thought was a big deal.

When Roy and Lisa returned, it was dark outside. Roy cooked what turned out to be a very tasty stew for dinner. Afterwards, Lisa used the staircase to go out onto the roof. Roy then told Alexander, "You should go talk to her, cheer her up if you can. She seemed down about something when we went to buy the glove for her."

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Somewhat embarrassed by the suggestion, Alexander replied, "I don't know her that well. I've only known her for a few weeks."

"And I've known her for a few hours," Roy said bluntly. Roy had a point; if she considered anyone friend enough to cheer her up, it was Alexander. So he went up to the roof and found her sitting near the edge, staring into the darkness of the forest.

She hadn't seemed to notice him come up, so Alexander thought to himself, *Okay, clueless, how do you cheer up a girl? I have no idea what to say to her. Think!* Looking around didn't prove much help either, as the sun had set hours ago and everything was dark. Then looking up, Alexander saw something about which to make idle chat. He walked over and sat down to Lisa's left. She acknowledged his presence with a quick glance but didn't say anything. Alexander didn't look at her but looked up and said, "The flare stars are active tonight."

Lisa then looked up, saying, "Hadn't noticed, but yeah, they are." The two of them just watched as, along with the normal stars that stayed in one place, many points of light dashed across the sky. Back and forth these strange stars would go. Sometimes lines of light would appear for a split second. Several flashes of light would come and go, almost never in the same place twice. After awhile, Lisa asked, "Ever wonder what the flare stars are?"

"Can't say I have put much thought to it."

"Ever come up with anything?"

"No."

They watched the strange light show of the night sky for awhile, speculating on what the strange stars could be. Then Alexander asked, "Is something bothering you?"

“I said if I didn’t come back in three days, I wasn’t going to go back. And tomorrow is day three. I can’t put it off anymore. I have to decide if I want to stay here or go back to Rosewood tomorrow.”

“Why did you stay as long as you have anyway? I thought you would have gone back today.”

“I don’t know. I found out why you couldn’t touch the black monster core gem. So, I got what I came here for. I just... it’s like my mind says to go back, but my gut says to... stay with you,” she said, blushing.

Alexander also found himself suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation. “Well then. Let me know what you decide,” he said, getting up and walking back to the door from which he had come.

When it came time for bed, Roy let Lisa use his room while he and Alexander made do with the couch and floor in the den. As sleep came, Alexander again found the dream of the field of darkness with the few points of light and the distant song of the flute. Alexander’s dream-self tried chasing different points of light but ended up with the same result as the night before.

When morning came, Alexander awoke to find Leo and Roy waiting on him and Lisa. While they waited, Roy asked, “Don’t suppose you know how late she usually sleeps in ‘til?”

Pondering the question for a moment, Alexander noted that usually she would wake him up, not the other way around. *Then again, she probably stayed up late thinking about whether to stay or go*, he thought. It then occurred that he had never explained Lisa’s problem to Leo and Roy, so he did just that.

“I see. So that’s what it was,” muttered Roy under his breath, then suggesting, “We could go without her. After all,

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three on ten are acceptable odds in my calculations. So, if we can find two groups of ten monsters in the marsh, we can meet the requirement with only moderate risk.”

“Fine with me. Let’s go,” Leo immediately said, clearly eager to attempt the task.

“That’s fine with me too,” Alexander added, straightening his cape.

However, as Alexander made for the door, Leo stopped him and said, “You don’t plan on fighting monsters like that, do you?”

“Like this?” Alexander said, puzzled and looking himself over, wondering what was wrong.

“In plain cloth? Look, I don’t care what it might be enchanted with, clothes like that can’t possibly protect you better than real armor,” Leo said. He went into his room and came out with a chain mail shirt that was several sizes too big for Alexander. “Put this on,” he said tossing it to him. “It’s got a little enchantment on it too, so there is no way what you’ve got is better. Besides, it’s too small for me now.” Slightly too small for Leo, however, turned out to come down to Alexander’s knees.

“Great, a chain mail shirt for you is a tunic for me,” Alexander said, more disappointed that he couldn’t really see much of his blue shirt through the chain mail than anything else.

“Yeah, well I’d get you some of my old leggings, but I don’t think I have any small enough,” Leo said mockingly. “All jokes aside, now that you are ready, shall we be off?”

“You boys planning on having all the fun without me?” Lisa’s voice startled everyone.

“We were getting tired of waiting for you to wake up. But now that you are awake, we can go,” Leo replied. With that,



the four young adventurers set out for the marshes north of Tsumarios.

An hour later, they were lying on a low sandbar, looking at a camp of lizard-like monsters. There were ten of them walking through the shallow waters of the marsh, standing upright and carrying weapons like spears or staves. With mucky, green, leathery skin, they looked like they would prove a challenge to beat. Spotting two more groups in the distance, Alexander worried that the other groups of monster might come running to join the fight if they noticed a clash.

“Okay,” Leo whispered to the group, “here’s what we are going to do. Alexander, you come with me, we are going to charge the ones on the left side of the group. Roy and Lisa, you pick them off, starting from the right side of the group. That way, Alexander and I won’t have to hold off more than three each at the peak of the fight.”

*‘Only’ three-on-one the man says*, Alexander thought to himself with a hint of sarcasm. “Are you sure we can take them?” was the only thing he said aloud though.

“From my calculations, this should be manageable,” Roy was the one to answer.

“Ready?” Leo asked. Each of them nodded a ‘yes.’

The four young adventurers stood up and Alexander and Leo started to charge the pack of monsters. They had only taken about ten running steps when Alexander heard Roy’s voice say, “No! Don’t use...” Twang. “...fire magic.”

Sure enough, one of Lisa flaming crossbow bolts went zooming past him. When Leo saw the bolt, he dropped his sword, turned around and tackled Alexander, knocking him down under the surface of the marsh waters. As this happened, Alexander saw Roy create a wall of ice around himself and Lisa. Then, looking up past Leo to the surface,

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Alexander saw a wave of fire rush over them, followed immediately by a thunderous roar. The temperature of the water suddenly spiked, becoming uncomfortably hot. After the turmoil passed, Leo got off Alexander, letting him sit up and gasp for air. Looking around, Alexander saw a huge cloud of dust and ash centered where the bolt had hit. The dust cloud looked strangely like a mushroom. He also saw that the plants had all been incinerated above the waterline. Looking behind, he saw a slightly singed Roy and Lisa looking in awe at the destruction.

Summoning the aura of healing light, Alexander watched as the burn marks on the two vanished. Roy smiled in thanks for the healing, but Lisa was still staring at the cloud of ash that was now getting dispersed by the winds.

“That was so *cool!* Tell me I can do that again!”

“I imagine you’ve burned off all the marsh gas in the area, but if you fired at the untouched parts of the marsh, you could get the same result,” Roy said, more to himself than Lisa. However, that didn’t stop Lisa from firing three more flaming bolts to the northeast, north, and northwest of where they stood. Sure enough, three more thunderous explosions erupted from where the bolts landed. This time, the four adventurers were far enough away that only a painfully hot wind reached them. Alexander’s healing aura quickly relieved the pain. Then, as she brought her crossbow up to fire again, Roy touched it with his fingers and ice formed around its firing mechanism. “You just barbecued half a marsh! I think you’ve done enough damage for one day, so put on your diffuser glove and help us gather the gems,” he added.

“I guess you right,” Lisa said with a sigh. She then proceeded to do as Roy suggested. The four adventurers spent the better part of the day gathering the monster core gems from the now-charred marsh. Upon return to farmer Prigen,

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he was most impressed with the job they had done. Though he wanted to reward them all for their extraordinary effort, he could only afford the agreed wage of two gold coins.

That night, when they had returned to the house on the edge on the woods, Leo divided up the spoils of the day's adventure in to five equal takes. When asked why, he explained the "Team Fund" rule that he and Roy had been using: the basic idea being that, no matter how many participate in the task, there is always one share that goes to the team fund. It was set aside for things that only the whole team could agree on buying, usually things like improvements to the house or food, and they used their own money to buy stuff for themselves. The idea sounded reasonable enough, so Alexander and Lisa agreed to follow it as well.

## **Chapter 4: The Dragon Core**

The four new friends continued to live in the house at the edge of the forest, working together to make a living. Spring gave way to summer and summer became fall. During that time, they use the team fund to repair the top floor of the old house so Alexander and Lisa now had their own rooms and Roy could use his again. With each task the four adventurers completed, their popularity grew with the citizens of Tsumarios. At first it was the farmers, then carpenters, and then other tradesmen. Then by midsummer, the innkeepers and tavern owners began to offer them tasks or even point those looking to hire bounty hunters to the four. Alexander especially seemed to help the group's reputation when he would go out and, for the sake of practicing with the aura of healing light, heal anyone with the slightest wound. This led to the occasional odd occurrence of having an injured townsman show up and seek healing. Although Alexander was more than happy to do so, he pointed out that the priests in the cathedral were just as skilled with healing magic and, being in the city, were much closer than his house on the edge of the woods.

One autumn day, Alexander stood in his room, staring out the window at the autumn leaves with their yellows and oranges, like nature's fireworks display. He still wore the chain-mail shirt Leo gave him, and though it fit a little better, it still looked more like a tunic than a shirt on him. He now had chain-mail pants on over his cloth ones, and another improvement was the mail-clad boots.

All of this armor was bathed in the light blue glow of the aura of healing light. Alexander realized that he had begun

his personal endurance test three days ago and had maintained the aura the whole time. Dismissing the aura, the blue glow faded and Alexander still felt refreshed, as if he hadn't been using magic at all. Recalling that the angel had said such a level of mastery was possible, Alexander felt a small joy in thinking he had mastered a form of holy elemental magic.

Then, through the window, he saw Roy come out of the trees toward the front door. Though Alexander had seen such a sight many times since meeting Roy, this time he was practically running back to the house. Wondering what had Roy so excited, Alexander turned around and made for the door of his room.

Coming down the stairs into the main room of the small house, Alexander found Leo sitting on his usual chair, Lisa lounging on the couch, and Roy catching his breath after having just closed the door behind him.

“What's up?” Leo asked.

“You will never believe who just asked us to do a job for him,” Roy said through his panting. Before anyone could guess, he added, “I just came from the magi tower.”

Leo and Lisa's jaws dropped in amazement at this. Alexander simply assumed that this meant a mage had asked Roy to have Leo's Monster Hunters, as that was what they seemed to be known as, do a job for him. Even though Alexander didn't pay much attention to the politics of the day, he knew that those with enough magical skill to be a true mage were considered to be an upper class in society, perhaps even equal to royalty. Dwelling on this, Alexander understood how the others were impressed that their reputation had made its way to the magi tower.

“So what's the job?” Leo asked.

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“He says there is a new earth elemental dragon to the south and he wants the dragon core gem.” After a moment of silence, Roy continued, “He said that if we can bring him that gem, he would teach us each a new magic skill. And yes, I made sure he knew that meant he would be teaching all four of us. *And* he said he would spread word of our skill among the magi community.”

“No reward is worth anything if we can’t claim it. So the only real question is do you think we can actually beat a dragon? After all, dragons are a lot stronger than your average monster,” Leo asked.

“He helped me cast a far sight spell to scout the dragon. I think that it would take the four of us, but yes, I think we can defeat it.”

A new silence fell on the room

"You know this is nuts, right? Even adult monster hunters fear dragon-type monsters," Alexander broke the silence.

Then Leo spoke, “Well, one thing is clear. We will need all four of us to even think about attempting this task. But, being as dangerous as it is, this will need to be a unanimous decision. So, everyone, think about it before you chose to try this or not. And to start it off, I vote ‘yes,’ because I trust Roy. If he says we can do it, then we can do it, and I can’t pass up the chance to get in good with the magi community.”

Roy spoke up as soon as Leo had finished, “I wouldn’t have told you about the job if I didn’t want to do it, so obviously I vote ‘yes.’”

Lisa wasted little time in voicing her opinion. “What the heck. It’s just a dragon. Let’s go kick its butt.” In spite of her choice of words, her usual tone of cheerful recklessness was gone. She sounded deadly serious, almost as if she had a personal vendetta against the dragon.

With Alexander as the only one not having voted, a long silence came. Not sure if this was a good idea, Alexander thought long and hard. His friends soon went about doing other things, obviously trying not to pressure him into a decision that wasn't his own. As Alexander pondered the situation, he tried to understand why the others had said 'yes.' Leo was easy; he was always trying to expand their reputation to compete with the grownup bounty hunters. Roy was almost as easy to figure out; he was sold on the idea of learning another magic skill. However, Lisa was a mystery to him. In spite of choosing the life of a monster hunter, she wasn't one that seemed to like actively risking her life, though her reckless actions usually did this anyway. On top of that, the tone she had taken when speaking on the matter almost scared him. Alexander wasn't sure why he said what he did, whether it was the fact that the others had already voted 'yes,' or that he didn't want to get in Lisa's way of whatever she had against dragon-type monsters, but when he finally cast his vote, he said 'yes.'

A few hours later, the four young adventurers stood at the southwest edge of the forest, looking up the mountainside before them at a rather large cave about one fourth of the way up the mountain.

"Well, this is our point of no return," said Leo. "We either turn around here or climb up to that cave and never look back. So, is everyone sure we want to try this?" After a quick conformation from the rest of the group, Leo turned to Roy and asked the obvious question, "So, how do we kill a dragon?"

"First of all, it's an earth elemental dragon. This is good because this means it doesn't have any form of ranged magic. It will rely on its physical strength and stone scale armor.

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Second, watch out for its front claws, as they have a stone spike that it will most likely be using as its main form of attack. Also, those front claws are faster than they look. Finally, the best part is that earth elemental monsters are weak against ice magic, so the basic plan is that the three of you will keep it busy while I look for a weak point in its armor and then let loose with my magic.”

“Sounds simple enough. Let’s go!” Leo said as he began to walk up the mountainside with the others following closely behind him.

As they neared the cave’s mouth, the mountain’s slope was too steep to walk on, but the four adventuresome monster hunters managed to climb up to the mouth of the dragon’s cave. Looking in, they saw that it was asleep. Alexander was relieved to find surprise would be on their side. Leo also saw the use of this opportunity as he quietly motioned for them all to rest before attacking the dragon. While they sat in the entrance of the shallow cave, Alexander looked about and saw that although the cave wasn’t very long, it could have still fit several houses in it.

Looking at the dragon itself, Alexander noticed that, even while it lay there, it was the size of the first floor of their house and would probably gain another few feet when it stood up. Its front two feet had a stone scythe-like hook on them. Alexander remembered what Roy had said about using some kind of magic to see the dragon before coming here and had to agree with his assessment that those were the dragon’s preferred form of attack.

Looking to his teammates, he noticed that Leo had only glanced over at the dragon and then pretty much ignored it while he waited for everyone to rest up from the climb. It seemed that he was trying to show courage so everyone else wouldn’t worry about the difficulty of this task. Roy spent the



whole rest time examining the stone-like scales of the dragon, unquestionably looking to find a weak point in the dragon's armor before the fight even began. However, from the look on his face, the young ice mage wasn't having much luck. Lisa just looked as angry as a girl could look while sitting still and making no sound. She just stared at the dragon, and if looks could kill, Alexander figured the dragon would be dead already.

After a short rest, Leo turned to the rest of the team and motioned out a basic plan by using hand gestures. He and Alexander would sneak in while Lisa and Roy would fan out to the left and right. Leo didn't bother trying to come up with something more detailed, it was apparent that he was relying on Roy to find the best means to bring the dragon down. That seemed reasonable to Alexander too; he knew enough to realize that ice magic was earth magic's weak point. Roy seemed to acknowledge this assumption as he quietly stood up and began walking to the left side of the cave, positioning himself for the fight. Lisa mirrored Roy's positioning and readied her crossbow, never making a sound. This left Leo and Alexander, who unsheathed their swords as quietly as they could and then crept as silently as could be expected from two boys dressed in chain-mail.

As they approached the dragon, its tail was gently raising and lowering itself next to the dragon's head. This reminded Alexander of the way he had seemed some cats rest. *Rest, but not sleep*. It dawned on him as he and Leo were only a step away from striking distance. As Leo raised his sword, the dragon's tail came slamming down, hitting the ground with such force that Leo fell backward just from the vibrations of the cave floor. Having perceived that the dragon might have only been feigning sleep to turn surprise in its favor, Alexander managed to stay standing upright.

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The dragon jumped up from its sleeping pose to all fours in the blink of an eye, leaving no doubt in Alexander's mind that the dragon had indeed been faking sleep, waiting to spring its own trap. Then it slammed its tail against the ground again, sending a shock through the floor that made Leo stumble to keep his balance; Alexander, not as surprised by the dragon's sudden attack, had jumped and avoided the ground's sudden jolt. Running past Leo, Alexander reached the dragon first and swung as hard as he could at its front right leg. The blade bounced off, leaving only a tiny scratch on one of the dragon's stony scales. The dragon, less than impressed, raised its paw into a backhand-style motion to attack. Seeing the curved bladed talon on the dragon's foot, Alexander brought his sword down and instinctively braced it with his free hand. Strength amplifying magic or not, he was a child trying to stand his ground against the force of a multi-ton dragon. Alexander's foolish attempt to block the blow only sent him flying back toward the entrance of the cave.

As Alexander flew past Roy, he saw a purple glow around Roy's right hand, which he was keeping hidden from the dragon's view. A similar glow appeared around Alexander's shoulders and he felt it tugging, slowing him down and keeping him upright as he fell to the ground. Even though his landing wasn't exactly graceful, it was undoubtedly much less painful than it would have been if not for Roy's help.

Taking a moment to look things over, Alexander saw that Leo had learned from Alexander's mistake and was dodging every attack the dragon made. However, this left only time for quick glancing blows from the young monster hunter, blows that fared no better than Alexander's attack. Then, a blazing bolt of fire caught Alexander's eye as it exploded into a fireball upon hitting the dragon's head. Then another, and another, and the dragon seemed to have his hands full trying

to deal with the pesky kid at his feet and so took to tilting its head to avoid letting the flaming bolts hit its eyes. Alexander noted that he had never seen Lisa's fire magic this strong before, even if they were only leaving tiny scorch marks on the dragon's forehead. He looked to Roy and, seeing that he had Roy's attention, gave a nod of thanks for the help moments before. Then Roy turned back to the fight and resumed watching it unfold. By now, Alexander had known Roy long enough not to question the reasoning of a mage. Even if he was a kid like himself, Roy had shown impeccable knowledge in the past, and Alexander didn't doubt for a moment that Roy was waiting for the right moment to let the dragon have it with an icy assault. Wishing his reprieve could last a moment longer, Alexander summoned the aura of healing light and the thin strands of blue light appeared around him, then around Lisa, Roy, and Leo.

This seemed to cause the dragon some concern and it looked about, confused as to the source of the magic, but it couldn't seem to identify which of the four little humans was the caster. Distracted, the dragon failed to fully dodge one of Lisa's bolts, and it exploded mere centimeters from its eye and the dragon made a quick howl as the flames burned the more vulnerable surface. Then, blinking and shaking it off, the dragon returned to the task at hand of the boy with a sword scratching up its armored scales. With that sign of weakness from the dragon, Alexander once again charged to retake his place in the fight.

Running past Lisa, Alexander readied his blade with his eyes set on the dragon's side. A faint glow appeared around his sword as Alexander charged past on the right side of the dragon, raking his blade down the length of the creature. Though it left a deep scratch on every scale it passed over, the dragon was clearly not bothered by the display and ignored

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him, choosing to focus on Leo instead. Now by the dragon's hind right leg, Alexander just stood there thinking, *You have got to be kidding me. I give it all I have and all I get is a scratch? There must be something I'm overlooking.* Taking advantage of the fact that the dragon seemed to have forgotten he was there, Alexander stood still, looking the dragon over for a weakness that he could take advantage of.

Then he noticed that one of the dragon's leg joints seems to have scales that flexed as the dragon moved. With a small smile, Alexander made his move. A faint glow of white light again surrounded his blade as he slashed into the scale and jumped back out. The scale cracked. Alexander hit the scale again with all he could. This time, the scale broke in two and the shards fell to the ground, exposing a brown leathery skin. Alexander thrust his sword into the newly made hole in the dragon's armor, using his blade like a crowbar to pry off another scale from underneath and causing the dragon to howl in surprise and pain.

At this, the dragon turned around, whipping its tail out and knocking Leo back. Facing Alexander now, the dragon lifted its left claw high, trying to center its scythe-like talon over him. Then the dragon brought it down with crushing force. It would have been an impressive attack if not for the fact that its target had stepped to the side and was now thrusting its sword at the joint scales on the right paw. Again shattering a scale, Alexander would have reveled in his small victory if he didn't figure the dragon was about to kill him for it. Being between the cave wall and the dragon, Alexander saw there was little room to maneuver. Seeing that blocking the dragon's attacks wasn't an option, he knew his position was a very dangerous thing.

The dragon raised its claw again, this time ready to bring it down at an angle so it couldn't be dodged so easily.

Glancing to the side, Alexander didn't see the room to dodge this impending attack and frowned. *Finally messed up bad this time*, he thought to himself, bracing for the attack. The attack never came. Rather, a loud, unnatural chime sounded through the cave, mixed with a crackling sound.

Looking up, Alexander saw the dragon's claw hovering in place, ready to come down. However, the dragon's eyes seemed devoid of thought, as if in a trance. Poking his head to the side, Alexander saw the hindquarter of the dragon where he had made a gap in the dragon's scale armor was now encased in ice. Roy's hand now outstretched, it instantly became clear that Roy saw fit to show his hand in the fight. The dragon's head slowly turned to look at the three young monster hunters behind it, just in time to see Roy nod at Lisa, whose crossbow was ready with one of her magically burning bolts. Lisa let the bolt fly, right at the now frozen weak point in the dragon's armor. The resulting explosion of fire and shattering ice tore a dozen scales off the dragon. To add even more damage, Leo rushed in and cut a long gash into the exposed dragon skin. The dragon lowered its front claw, not in attack, but to jump around to face what it now knew was the biggest threat. Alexander sighed in relief, but by giving himself this luxury he completely forgot to dodge the tail of the dragon that followed as the dragon turned around to face Leo and the others. Smashing him across the chest, the tail crushed him against the wall of the cave.

The pain in his chest and the cracking sound gave more than enough proof to Alexander that his ribs had been broken and his lungs crushed. As the dragon's tail slid off, releasing him from the cave wall, Alexander collapsed, propped up by the wall. Unable to move a muscle, Alexander thanked whoever it was that made the armor he was wearing; without it, he had no doubt that he would be dead already. This

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caused Alexander to wonder why he was still alive anyway. He couldn't breathe, the only thing he could move was his eyes, and he was covered from head to toe with an assortment of cuts he had gained from being raked across the cave wall by the dragon's tail. Then, a small blue light came down in front of his eyes, and Alexander would have smiled if he could have but found the pain too much to try. *Wow, this healing magic stuff is really nice. I guess if you're not dead already, it can heal anything.* With that, Alexander just lay there, waiting for his healing aura to do its job as he watched Leo, Lisa, and Roy continue to fight the dragon.

However, it only took seconds after the dragon turned around for Roy to launch another icy assault against the weak point Alexander had created on the front of the dragon. Again, Lisa followed it with a blazing bolt, shattering another dozen scales. Now whenever the dragon tried to advance against Roy, Leo's blade would dig deep into the dragon's flesh. As the battle continued, Roy and Lisa stripped the dragon's whole front side of its armored scales and were now just shooting the dragon at random on its exposed skin. Leo was now drenched in a brown muddy fluid that moved and smelled like mud, but seemed to pass for the earth elemental dragon's blood, seeing as it flowed from all the deep wounds.

It had only taken a couple of minutes for his healing aura to slide his ribs back into place and allow him to breathe again, but it seemed like forever to Alexander. Nonetheless, once he could stand up without pain forcing him back to the ground, he picked his sword up off the cave floor and started slashing at the backside of the dragon where Roy and Lisa had blasted a large hole in the dragon's armor. Even though the cutting and thrusting wasn't much damage to the dragon compared to what Roy's magic was doing, it was something.

The dragon's now sluggish movements soon ground to a halt, and with one final cry, it fell to the ground. In the traditional manner of monsters, a blast of black and purple smoke filled the cavern, and as it cleared, only a skeleton and a large brown gem lay where the dragon had been. The skeleton then turned black and crumbled to dust, which was scattered to some unseen wind, leaving only the gem which was the size of both of Alexander's hands put together. The four monster hunters just stood there in complete silence for a moment, awestruck at what they had just accomplished.

In fact, Alexander had only heard of a few legendary monster hunters that took on dragons, though sometimes entire state armies would kill a dragon if one harassed its citizenry too much, and usually it was the latter case.

"Yes! We did it!" Lisa finally broke the silence, and Roy and Leo also added their own cheers of celebration. Alexander, however, just stood there and managed a smile, still dazed by what had just happened.

Roy then wrapped up the gem in a spare piece of cloth and said, "Well, shall we go claim our prize from our client?" Everyone nodded in agreement and the four of them started the walk back to Tsumarios.

Though it was evening when the four young monster hunters reached the magi tower in Tsumarios, the door was open. Roy, being the only one to spend much time in the tower, led them up a confusing set of stairs that Alexander could have sworn were too big to fit inside the tower as it appeared from the outside. They passed several doors that Roy pointed out were magic shops, reagent vendors, research labs, or classrooms. Eventually, they reached a door with a frame of gold and the doorknob of silver. The whole door

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glowed with a small rainbow of colors magically enchanted into it.

“This is what we are looking for,” Roy said, smiling as the magic glow on the door formed the words ‘Open Late for Special Business.’ “And it seems we are expected,” Roy added.

Sure enough, the door was unlocked as Roy pushed it open, and they stepped into a room that was filled with the scent of a hundred different herbs and potions. Compared to the halls of the rest of the tower, the room was rather plain. It had rows of basic shelves with scrolls and books and a simple wooden desk and chair where a man sat. The chair had no armrests and the back was made of two pieces of wood slapped haphazardly together. The man himself was dressed in a fancy purple robe with blue, white, and black styling that formed a series of runes, which Alexander assumed were magical in nature, along the sleeves’ rims. As for the rest of the man, he had long white hair, which seemed to be a common hairstyle among mage types, a short white beard, and deep purple eyes.

Alexander hadn’t seen many magi before and only really knew one, that being Roy, who wasn’t exactly a master mage but more of a skilled apprentice. Although, after that battle with the dragon, Alexander figured maybe it was time to see Roy as stronger than just a mere apprentice mage.

“Greetings,” the man said. “I suppose I should introduce myself to the three that haven’t had the privilege of meeting me before,” he continued with a smile. “My name is Konon Krafer, master mage, traveler, and researcher of dragons. And I must say I am pleased to see how well you did this day!”

“Glad we could be of service,” Leo returned with his diplomatic voice.



“Yes, you are no doubt wondering about your payment,” Konon said. “I have seen enough of you to know that you like to get right down to business, and after today, you no doubt want to get this over with as quickly as possible so you can return home. As promised, you may all peruse my tomes and find a spell that you wish to learn, one for each of you. However, for three of you, I would say you only have the skill to learn something from the tomes on the two shelves on the left. Roy, on the other hand, may want to peruse the two in the middle, namely the far one as that’s where you will find my ice magic spells. When you have all found something that appeals to you, come see me and I will teach them to you.”

“Thank you,” Leo said with a bow and then turning to find the tomes the mage had mentioned. Lisa and Roy headed over to the shelf that was pointed out to the each of them. Alexander followed suite and went over to the same two shelves as Leo and Lisa. Most of the tomes were marked with names like “Basic Fire Spells volume I,” or “The Use of Earth Magic.” Leo was looking through “Lightning Spells for Beginners.” Lisa was gleefully reading the “One Hundred Ways to Burn a Monster. And Most Anything Else.” Alexander picked up a copy of “A Monster Hunter’s Guide to Wind Magic.”

Opening the spell book he saw an index showing spell listed by name and what page to find them on. Looking at the pages with the spell, he found they gave basic descriptions of what the spell was suppose to do and a few tips on how to use the spell effectively. Then, looking through five more spell books, Alexander found that not much of it seemed interesting to him. Once he saw that the others had picked something out and were waiting on him, he just looked at the spells on a page of “Lightning Magic: Shocking Spells for the

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New Mage” and figured the lightning-infused weapon spell looked better than anything else on the page.

“We’re ready,” Leo said as they returned to the mage’s desk.

“Very good then, what did you decide on?” As they each told the mage what they wished to learn, he would bring his hands close together and a small orb would appear. He would hand the orb to the one who was to learn the spell, it would shatter, and several lights would surround them for a few seconds. Watching it reminded Alexander of how the angel had taught him the aura of healing light.

Lisa had chosen an exploding bolt spell that was basically a more powerful version of what she used most of the time anyway. Leo chose a spell call Shock Wave that was a short-ranged lightning elemental wave that came off his sword when he swung it. It was no surprise that Roy’s new spell was much more impressive; after all, he was better with magic than any of the others. His was a spell that showered hundreds of icy shards down on the target area.

When it came to Alexander’s turn, he told the mage about the lightning-infused weapon spell he saw, and the mage proceeded to do as he had for the others. Only this time, when Alexander touched the orb, instead of being granted the knowledge of how to cast a spell, a surge of pain flooded through him and he fell backward. Now sitting on the floor, he looked up to see that Konon was just as surprised as he was that the attempt had backfired.

“Are you alright, little one?” Konon asked.

“I think so. What happened?”

“Hmm, good question. Give me a moment.” With that, the mage used his forefingers and thumbs to make a small triangle in which a thin film of purple light formed, and he then looked at Alexander through it for a few moments.

“Ho, I see! So, a paladin to be, huh? No wonder you can’t learn my magics. The spells of a simple mage are incompatible with you, young one. But I did promise a spell to all of you, so I’ll tell you what I’ll do.” With a flick of his wrist, a parchment and feather pen flew into his hands, and he scribbled down a note and handed it to Alexander saying, “Take this note to the cathedral. It explains our situation, and they will be able to teach you a spell in my stead.” Turning to Leo, who looked like he was about to ask something, Konon said, as if answering the unasked question, “And yes, I haven’t forgotten the last part of the deal. I will make sure that word spreads among the magi community that Leo’s Monster Hunters are the most skillful in the land.” Alexander stood up and took the note, and with that the four of them left the mage’s shop.

“So, did you want some company on your side trip to the cathedral?” Lisa asked.

Thinking about the offer for a moment, Alexander answered with, “No, I’ll just catch up to you guys later.” Then tuning down the road that lead to the cathedral, Alexander parted ways with his friends.

A few minutes later, Alexander found himself standing in front of the cathedral doors as the sun was setting, the stain glass windows reflecting a rainbow of colors on the fountain plaza. Knocking on the double doors, it took only a moment before the priest who lived and worked here opened it.

“I see, you’ve come back,” he said with a gentle smile.

“Yes, but not for the reason you think,” a second familiar voice answered before Alexander could say anything. It wasn’t hard to identify the source as the winged figure standing in-between the rows of pews. He continued, “I know why you are here. Your dealings with a mage proved that, no matter what your mind thinks, your heart is set on learning

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only magics of the holy elemental alignment. And so you are here, where such a spell can be taught in exchange for services rendered to said mage.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Of course. I will teach you that which is taught to all whom seek the power of holy magic. This is a spell called healing light. Much like the aura, its purpose is to heal the target of the spell; however, unlike the aura, it is not a sustainable healing but rather a burst that gets the job done in an instant. I trust you remember what magical fatigue feels like. As like most spells, no matter how well you master this spell, you will never find that you can cast it indefinitely, so use it sparingly.” With that, the Angel held out his hand, and a sphere of golden light appeared. The angel held it low, and Alexander took it to mean he was to come take the sphere from him. He walked up and touched it, and like when he had learned the aura, memories that didn’t belong to him flooded his mind, memories of someone else learning to bend the flows of energy into the spell of healing light. When the visions faded, the angel smiled and said, “Remember, as powerful as this healing magic is, it can mend any wound but death itself.”

“So don’t die, heal stuff. Gotcha.”

“If you ever decide to walk the paladin’s path, I’ll be here,” the angel replied, chuckling at Alexander’s remark.

Stopping in the doorway, Alexander turned around and asked, “You’re not mad that I didn’t come here for that, are you?”

“Why would I be? Go on, little one. When the time is right, you will have to choose a path on your own. No one can choose what path you walk in life but you.”

“I see,” Alexander said as he turned back to face the streets of Tsumarios.

## **Chapter 5: The Crimson Moon Bandits**

If Leo's Monster Hunters thought they had been popular before, they had to think again. When word spread that not only had they slain a dragon, but that they had done it at the request of a powerful mage, the four young monster hunters instantly found themselves at the top of everyone's list when the services of a monster hunter were required. While Leo, Roy, and Lisa seems to adapt well to this sudden deluge of requests, Alexander found it hard to turn someone requesting help away, until he had managed to acquire enough jobs to keep him running around for days getting them done. He managed to keep himself so busy in fact, that it took him over a month to notice that most of the monster hunters Alexander had seen in the taverns or inns looking for work had left town. Only the ones that had been in good standing with Leo were still around town, as Leo referred the extra job offers to them when he didn't think they could take care of the request in a timely manner.

For monster hunters, the four kids seemed to have everything going perfectly. With no shortage of job offers, not only did they get a lot of monster core gems but also plenty of coin. As the fall gave way to winter, even the caravans coming in and out of the city were turning to "Leo's Little Monster Hunters" as they were called most commonly. While none of the four young monster hunters particularly liked that people seemed to find it necessary to point out that kids were smaller than adults, the name stuck. Not even Leo could get the townsmen to drop the 'little' from the title. One thing that did seem to bother Alexander was that, when he overheard the whispers about himself, people were

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increasingly referring to him as “That paladin kid with Leo’s Little Monster Hunters.” He couldn’t help but wonder why they insisted on thinking of him as a paladin when he only knew two healing spells, and he knew most priests had more holy elemental spells than that. Whatever the reason, he tried to ignore it and mind his own business, that being monster hunting.

Soon, winter set in and a blanket of snow covered the land, which reduced the steady flow of customers willing to trek out of the city walls to the little house in woods where Leo and his monster hunters lived. Alexander found the slow pace most welcome as he soon discovered time to call his own, time that he spent practicing the healing light spell.

“Perhaps we have been too successful,” Leo said out of the blue one morning late in winter.

“Oh?” said Lisa, one eyebrow raised in a questioning look

“Things are too slow even for winter. I haven’t even *seen* a monster in like two weeks.”

“Well, if you consider all that’s happened, it’s not surprising,” Roy got into the conversation before it turned into an argument and continued, “Between us and the other monster hunters in town, we have taken care of every monster problem within a day’s walking distance of Tsumarios. We have even helped the city guard reduce the crime problem, so it’s no wonder that everyone is in a good mood.”

Seeing where Roy was going with the line of logic, Leo finished the thought with, “And considering monsters are created from the negative energies of suffering and misery, the lack of monsters is to be expected.”

“Bingo!” Roy said with a bit of a smirk. “Now enjoy the slow times. Human nature will run its course, and then monsters will be all over again.”

“I’ll pass on the sitting around doing nothing. I’m going into town. Anyone want to come?” Alexander agreed with Leo’s sense of boredom and volunteered to go into Tsumarios, where they then split up to go to the various inns and taverns, looking to find something for monster hunters to do.

Stopping by the front bar of one of the inns, Alexander took a seat near the fire and started listening in on the chatter like he usually did. Rather, he would have if there had been any chatter at all. Looking around, he saw that the room was actually relatively busy for the inn, but no one was talking. It seemed as if they were afraid of something or someone. The inn that was normally a cozy place to enjoy the day and pick up a job or two was now giving Alexander the creeps. Whatever the cause, he got up and started back for the door. As he did so, a stranger spoke up.

“You’re that paladin kid with the monster hunters, right?”

Alexander turned to face the unfamiliar voice to see that it was, as he had guessed from the voice, not one of the inn’s usual customers. “I’m no paladin, but that’s what they call me anyway. Is there something I can help you with?”

“If you’re not a paladin, why do they call you that?”

“This, I guess,” Alexander responded with a shrug, summoning the aura of healing light.

With a smile that also gave Alexander the creeps, the stranger said, “I see,” and walked out the door.

Alexander made a quick mental note about the man. His attention drifted back to the red insignia he had on his cloak of a crescent moon with a drop hanging off one tip. When the door closed behind the man, the mood in the room lightened a little as people started whispering conversations about their day’s events. Alexander on the other hand, just stood there for a few minutes before finishing his own trek for the door.

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Once outside, a cold wind reminded him that winter still had a week to go before becoming spring, but Alexander really couldn't have cared less about the cold. Right now, something was wrong and it had something to do with the stranger. *But what*, Alexander thought. Choosing to wait by the guardhouse at the south-gate for Leo rather than trying to find a monster hunter job at another inn, Alexander tried to figure out what the deal was with that man. *Why did he frighten everyone else?* With almost nothing to go on, all he could guess was that maybe the man was a bounty hunter, the kind of person monster hunters always made sure to separate themselves from. While bounty hunters might kill monsters, they would also kill anything else for a price. Alexander didn't keep up on the who's-who in the world of bounty hunters, so for all he knew, that person was a renowned one.

The few hours that Alexander waited felt like days before Leo showed up and they headed back to their house in the woods. Leo wasn't exactly in a good mood either, as he hadn't found any jobs for them. However, Leo did mention that he had heard that someone was asking around about Alexander, but the people never mentioned who was looking. Alexander told Leo about the run-in at the inn, and they agreed that it was bizarre. Unless they wanted to go looking for the kind of trouble monster hunters usually avoided, they decided that they should let the matter go.

Back at the house in the woods, Alexander couldn't shake the feeling that he was overlooking something important about the strange man in town but couldn't nail it down. While Leo continued to fume about the lack of monster hunters jobs, Roy listened and made the odd suggestion or two while reading some book. Sometimes, Alexander thought Roy only bothered to make suggestions to prove he had heard Leo, not because he was actually trying to help.



As the sun set, an unfamiliar and mocking voice yelled from outside, “Can paladin boy come out to play?”

Leo shot Alexander a look, commanding him to stay quite. Then readying his sword and slipping on his helm, the only two pieces of his gear he thought too uncomfortable to wear all day, Leo moved over to one side of a window. He saw three men outside, all of them armed with swords. The setting sun made it impossible to see more than their shapes through the window, so Leo motioned to Roy and Lisa, who had also gathered their monster hunting gear by now. They followed Leo out the door, leaving Alexander alone. Hidden behind the couch with sword in hand, he listened as best he could to the conversation of Leo and the men.

“What brings you out here this time of day?”

“We just want to talk to the little one with the white cape who heals with the paladin’s light.”

“If you have a job for him, you’ll tell me, and I’ll let him know when he gets back.”

“Oh? Then why is it I sense one more still inside?” Alexander knew there was a way for those attuned to magic to sense the energies of people or spells, and clearly one of the men knew this talent well enough that there was no point in pretending to hide.

He stepped outside, asking, “Fine, so I’m here. Now what did you have to say?”

One of the men came forward out of the shadows and nodded to his companions. At this, all of the men charged at the young monster hunters, blades ready for a fight.

It was only now that Alexander saw that these men also wore insignias with a crescent moon, and that in fact, one of them was the man he saw at the inn. It was this one that Alexander went after and met blades with. Leo’s blade now danced with the man who had motioned to attack, and the

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third man was too busy trying not to be skewered on an icicle or burning crossbow bolt to actually advance. It only took a few seconds before Roy and Lisa had pinned their target down, feet frozen to the ground and bolts pinning the man's cloak to the tree he had tried to use for cover. Leo and Alexander fought their attackers, barely holding their ground until a blast of ice slowed Leo's target and a flaming bolt glanced off the chest of Alexander's foe, allowing both young swordsmen to disarm their opponents with relative ease.

Now with time to examine what had happened, Roy was first to notice and identify the insignias worn by the men. "Crimson Moon Bandits," he muttered in controlled disbelief.

While Lisa and Leo suddenly looked rather pale, Alexander was drawn back to the feeling that he was missing something. *That sounds familiar. Why can't I place where I have heard that before?* However, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of how he knew the name of the bandits' guild.

There was a slightly more pressing matter at hand that Leo pointed out. "What do we do with them now?"

The answer came from Lisa who was now digging through a backpack she had kept near the door. Pulling out a rope, she said, "Same thing we do with all the thieves we catch. Hand them over to the city guard and let them deal with the criminals."

After binding them and thawing the one free of the ground, the young monster hunters lead the bandits back to the city. Upon meeting the night shift of guards at the main gate, they explained what had happened. Said guards, who were normally happy to take in criminals handed in by the city's local heroes, suddenly seemed reluctant to do so. Nonetheless, they still took the bandits to the prison hold.

As they did, one of the bandits called back to the young monster hunters, saying, “You know this isn’t the end. It’s never the end until the Crimson Moon Bandits get what they want!”

The whole way home, Leo, Lisa and Roy wouldn’t leave Alexander alone about what he had done to earn the attention of the world’s most infamous and feared thieves’ guild. Maybe it was the confusion of the moment or that maybe he hadn’t been paying attention when it happened, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember having anything to do with such a guild in any way, shape, or form. His friends, however, wouldn’t let the matter slide, not this time. Alexander, frustrated with trying to come up with another way to say, ‘I don’t know,’ pulled out his flute and started to play it to drown out their constant questions.

Then the night he got the flute came back to him. The inn, the pendant, the two bandits he had fought and taken the pendant from, and Madam Rosewood, who had given him the flute for returning the heirloom to her. That was the night he had first heard of the Crimson Moon Bandits. Relaying the tale to his companions, they all agreed that they must have been after the pendant. Openly they agreed that was the reason anyway.

Alexander saw the look on Roy’s face, one he had seen enough to know that a private talk would be coming the moment Roy could get him out of earshot of the others. Roy was not only the oldest of them, but the smartest, and he didn’t like letting Leo know all of his concerns. It had something to do with not wanting him to worry about things Roy didn’t think he could offer good advice on. Why Roy bothered to tell these kinds of things to Alexander was beyond him. After all, if Roy couldn’t figure out a mystery,

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Alexander was usually stumped too. Nevertheless, when they got back to the house in the woods, Roy followed Alexander up to his room and closed the door behind them.

“So, what’s bothering you, Roy?” Alexander asked, slightly annoyed, though his annoyance was more at the fact that something he had done had brought trouble to his friends than at the events of the night.

“If they came looking for the pendant, why ask around town for ‘the paladin boy’ of Leo’s Little Monster Hunters?”

As was usually the case, Alexander took a moment and realized Roy’s point was a good one. He hadn’t known any paladin-like magic back when he took the pendant.

“He mentioned the cape too,” was the best Alexander could come up with to help Roy’s theory.

“Indeed he did. Maybe ‘the kid in the white cape’ was how they first knew of you and later learned of ‘the paladin kid’ also tending to wear a white cape,” Roy was more thinking out loud, though there was no way anyone outside the room could have heard him.

“So if more come, we just tell them I don’t have the pendant any more?” Alexander suggested weakly.

“Worth a shot. But with their reputation, I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if this is more about revenge for daring to oppose them.”

With that, Roy left. Alexander just stood there, unable to move. *What have I done? Better yet, how the heck am I going to fix this? I need to know more about these bandits. It seems everyone knows about them but me, so maybe it wouldn’t be too hard to get a feel for what I’ve walked into,* Alexander thought. When he could finally shake off the chills that had held him fast, he went to bed but couldn’t sleep.

When the light of dawn crept through the window, Alexander went into town to see what he could learn. His first stop, the city guards, told him that the Crimson Moon Bandits existed all over the world, and only nations or city-states with a standing army opposed them openly. The rest of the day only went downhill from there, as he dug up one horror story after another about the bandits. After awhile, he started to hear the same vaguely similar tales with nothing of real value learned other than they were a thieves' guild with a reputation for being downright evil at times. In the end, he guessed it didn't really matter. After all, he and Leo's Little Monster Hunters had just proven they could be beat, and by a bunch of monster hunter kids at that. Yet Alexander still worried. *So, no big deal right? If more of them came, they would just join their friends in jail... right?*

As he returned to the house, he found Leo pacing around the room the likes of which Alexander had never seen before. "What's up?" he asked.

"They let them go."

"Who?"

"*Them!* The bandits we turned in last night! The city guard let them go! While you were out and about all day, I went to check on the bandits, and the guards said that when the mayor heard about it, he had them let go."

Any sense of security Alexander had restored over the day shattered at Leo's words. "Why?" he couldn't help but ask even though he already knew the answer.

This time Roy saw fit to state the obvious. "The city of Tsumarios isn't willing to openly oppose them."

"Which then begs the question, what do we do about it?" Leo followed. To this, there was only silence.

Until out of the blue Roy said, "Get ready to fight."

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Leo made for his room to retrieve his gear, Lisa soon followed suit. Alexander noted that Roy wasn't looking at something in the house, but his eyes were fixed at some point obscured by walls and forest trees. Alexander ran up to his room to get his hunting armor on and wished he hadn't put off getting a helm.

This time the four were fully prepared to fight when the bandits made their presence known, which they did by setting the front wall of the house on fire. No taunts, no calling out to fight, just an ambush. Roy doused the flames he could from the inside with ice magic but the windows soon crashed in as bandits jumped through with swords and maces drawn. Leo and Alexander engaged the first two to come at them. Lisa and Roy let loose with all the firepower they could muster.

The bandits meant to kill them, and the young monster hunter returned the favor and fought without the usual self-restraint they applied when fighting humans. The only thing that separated a monster hunter from a bounty hunter was that self-restraint, and now they were fighting without it. While Lisa, Leo, and Roy seemed to begrudgingly accept the orders of their survival instincts, Alexander couldn't. He wouldn't. There had to be a way to stop them once and for all without ending lives. However, it was a hope that even he could find no way to bring into reality, and the longer he fought holding back, the more he risked losing his life.

Then the door came falling in and more fireballs smashed into the walls of the house, starting new fires which Roy no longer had time to douse. A new bandit appeared, this one dressed in full knight's armor with the insignia of the Crimson Moon Bandits on most of its pieces

"I am a Captain Rei of the Crimson Moon Bandits, and you will pay for what you have done."

Alexander figured that if he was going to mention the pendant, this captain seemed to be the one he should be talking to. Ducking under his current attacker's mace, he struck the back of his foe's hand with his sword, sending the mace flying into the flames.

With the nameless bandit now scurrying out of the house, Alexander yelled to the one named Rei, "I don't have the pendant anymore, so just go away!"

Rei turned to the boy and said, "What? Ah yes, I am aware that you sent the pendant beyond our reach, and so now you will pay for that... inconvenience. Now just be a good little boy and die!"

It was not the response Alexander was hoping to get. Worse yet, the captain was clearly no stranger to magic. Alexander was, outmatched, even completely outclassed. It was the best he could do to keep him at bay.

Moments later, a blast of fire slipped past Roy's magical defenses, and Roy wound up on the floor, clearly unconscious. Distracted by this, Alexander left an opening for the bandit captain, who summoned a dark aura around his blade and slashed it across Alexander's eyes. Everything went red and then black as he felt himself fall to the ground.

The darkness gave way to the field of lights that Alexander knew to be his dreams. Not that the thought of sleeping in the middle of a burning house was much better than being dead outright, but at least with this grace, he thought maybe he could wake up if only he tried. With no grasp of the flow of time, he didn't know how long it took him to regain some feeling from the waking world. However, he only felt something pulling at the neck of his shirt before he slipped back into the world of dreams.

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When he woke up again, Alexander saw a distant sparkle of random colored lights and one really bright light just off to the side. He thought he was still asleep at first, but then he heard Lisa's voice.

"He's waking up."

Turning his head to the source, Alexander saw a red light in a shape similar to Lisa sitting down. The light danced like fire. Looking beyond her, he saw many other lights in human shape milling about several yards behind and below her.

"That's good to hear." This time it was Roy's voice. Looking to it, he saw an icy blue light that was formed to Roy's shape, sitting down with an unseen object in one hand. Beyond him, Alexander saw a faint fiery red glow. When he listened, Alexander heard the slight crackling of a fireplace. Looking about, if that's what it could be called, Alexander soon began to notice that everything he could "see" was either alive, a magic item, or the energy of things like fire or the sun. He couldn't see most objects, like the bed he felt under him, the chairs in the room, or the walls of the room for that matter.

"I can't see," he finally said.

"Better than seeing the dead I guess," Roy returned. With a coughing laugh, Alexander had to agree blind was better than dead.

"Suppose I should be a bit more precise. I can only see weird lights in the shape of people, animals, and magic artifacts." His 'sight' was drawn to Lisa's weapon, which was a greenish glow in the shape of a crossbow.

"Magic sight," Roy said. "You are seeing with the eyes of your spirit, not the ones of your body," he explained before Alexander could ask. "Most have to be trained to see that way. The way you are looking about tells me you stumbled into it just now."



“Swell. How do I turn it off to see for real?”

“You might try your healing magics.” Feeling rather dumb that he had to be reminded he knew such magics, Alexander summoned the aura of healing light. He marveled at being able to actually see the energies of the spell flow around him and fill not only the room but a good half of the building they were in. Within moments, Alexander felt the scar over his eyes fade but, while he could feel his eyes open, he still couldn’t see anything. He also tried the spell of healing light, but to no avail.

“No good.”

“Not surprised,” Roy said, adding, “With the dark energies over your eyes, physical healing isn’t going to be enough. We need something that will dispel it before it will let you see again.”

Looking about the odd world of energy, Alexander turned his attention to a brilliant prismatic light that stood out from among the sea of other glowing figures. “The cathedral,” he said. If anyone could dispel strong shadow magic, it would be the priests at the cathedral, or better yet the angel. However, Alexander wanted to avoid asking the latter for help again if he could avoid it.

Then, two new figures caught his attention. The smaller one he would have guessed to be Leo, but he had no clue about the adult sized figure. They were standing several yards away and a little below him, so Alexander figured they were standing in the stairs and talking to each other, judging from the hand gestures. The two figures remained there for a few moments and then the larger figure went down to the first floor of the inn while the smaller figure came to the room.

On entering, the figure proved Alexander’s guess correct, as Leo’s voice came from it. “Oh good, you’re awake.” In

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spite of his effort to sound pleased, Alexander detected a hint of annoyance.

Roy clearly saw this as well and forced Leo's hand, asking, "What's wrong now?"

"Seems the mayor doesn't want to tick off the Crimson Moon Bandits anymore than possible," Leo answered.

"So he wants us to leave the city?"

"For the most part. As he said, 'because of all you have done for this city, I won't press the issue until your friend is well enough to travel.'"

"Then maybe it's a good thing that he can't see yet," Roy finished

At this, Alexander felt the focus of everyone in the room turn to him. About now, his mind was running around in circles trying to figure out how to fix this mess. *This is my fault and I have to fix it. But how?* Alexander thought. Coming up with nothing reasonable, the only option that seemed left to an eight-year-old was to cry. Two things kept this from happening. First, his friends were in the room and he wasn't about to break down and act his age in front of them. Second, he was a monster hunter and a boy, and he knew that crying wasn't acceptable behavior for either. A solution presented itself in the form of rolling over and letting his tears flow silently into the pillow.

Alexander pretended to have gone back to sleep for several hours before sitting back up to look around. Disappointed, he found he was still seeing with magic sight alone. He saw that Lisa was the only one still in the room with him and asked her if she would assist him in going to the cathedral.

"Was wondering how long it was going to take before you felt like getting this over with," she said, her words laced with

what sounded like annoyance and impatience. Getting out of bed, Alexander noticed he was missing his boots and, looking around, discovered that they had no magic about them, and so were invisible to him. Then Lisa walked over, bent down and picked them up off the floor on the opposite side of the bed from where he was looking.

Feeling that he now had everything ready, Alexander said, “Okay, let’s go,” and promptly walked into the closed door. Falling down, he mumbled quietly to himself, angry that he didn’t remember hearing it get closed.

“Just take my hand and I’ll guide you,” Lisa said with a small laugh.

Navigating the streets proved to be remarkably easy compared to an almost empty room as the magic sight allowed him to weave through the crowds of people-shaped lights, following the one he knew was Lisa.

As they walked, Alexander kept going over the problem he had caused and how he was going to fix it. *If monster hunters aren’t strong enough, and the city’s guards aren’t brave enough, who can help me fix this mess? An army, maybe? Yeah right, like an army is going to waste its time helping some random kid. No, what I need is a hero. Like the ones in all those stories about...* the train of thought brought him to the ironic answer that he was already going to the right place for a different reason. Yet he didn’t like the answer that came to him.

As they approached the cathedral, two things happened. First, Alexander tripped on the unseen steps, and second, he saw a blinding light down below the building. He knew that the only thing that powerful had to be the angel.

This time they didn’t even get the chance to knock before the door was opened before them. Alexander marveled, watching the magic shoot out from the angel, who was still

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down in the shrine, to open the door for them. They didn't get far before the priest came out to investigate who had entered, and he greeted them in the same tone as always.

"And what brings you here today, children?"

After explaining what had happened, the priest also tried to heal Alexander's affliction, but to no better result than Alexander got himself.

"Come, I think we need to take this matter to the best healer available," the priest said, leading Alexander by the hand down into the angel's waiting chamber. By the time they got there, the angel had come out of the inner sanctum and was waiting for them. Before Alexander could say a word the angel spoke.

"I know why you are here child and I can tell you that not even I can remove the magics that hide the world from your sight."

"Really? How come?"

"Well, if you *have* to know, I can, but such a spell would require hard-to-gather reagents. So, by the time we would have gathered them, the dark spell's energies will have faded on their own. So, you might as well not bother and you'll be fine in about four days."

"You're kidding, right?" Lisa asked, stunned that there was a problem that an angel couldn't fix instantly.

"Not at all," the angel replied.

Before Lisa could speak up again, Alexander interrupted, "Can I talk to him alone?" Lisa backed off and soon the priest followed.

"A paladin could stand up to the Crimson Moon Bandits right?"

"A paladin wouldn't be afraid to try."

"Then I want to become a paladin."

*Karl Klim*

To that, there was silence for a moment before the angel said, “You are in no shape to travel now. Come back when the spell has faded, and if you are still certain that is what you want, I will tell you what you need to know in order to start walking the paladin’s path.”

Over the next few days, Alexander thought repeatedly about how he was going to tell the others of his plan to become a real paladin. Most of them went along the lines of telling them that because the Crimson Moon Bandits were after him, they should just lie low somewhere, and he would get the bandits to leave him alone when he became a real paladin.