

I

A large square room glowed in the light of several torches spaced evenly on the walls. Tapestries depicting humans, dwarves, and elves being killed and eaten by ogres hung between the torches. On the far side of the room stood a sacrificial altar, and just in front of it, a pedestal held up a statue of the ogre god. In its hands lay a golden key. Dressed in animal skins and wielding clubs, a dozen ogres stood between the heroes and the key, all frozen in place. “What’s the plan, Axeman?” Dax asked.

“Cast a Confusion spell,” Alex replied. “Then I’ll rush in and chop down the ones that aren’t attacking each other.”

Dax pointed at the floor in front of the pedestal. “They’re avoiding that area. I’m thinking trap.”

“I’m thinking you’re right,” Alex agreed. “I’ll try and avoid it during the fight. Then you can use your magic to disarm it.”

Dax shook his head. “Still looks too easy.”

“I know, but we need that key. You ready?”

“Yep.”

Alex pressed the pause button, and the video game resumed. Dax hit his controls, making his wizard cast the Confusion spell. Icons appeared over most of the ogres’ heads, indicating that they had been confused. Then each ogre attacked the nearest thing to it, which, at the moment, was another ogre. Alex’s Axeman rushed into the battle at once. He defeated the first ogre easily with a Power Attack and then used his Whirlwind feat to make his character spin like a top to chop into three more ugly foes. By then, Dax was firing lightning bolts into the battle. Alex had to guide his character carefully to avoid the altar until a well-placed Bash Blast sent an ogre flying onto the trapped area. A bed of spikes rose up from the floor impaling it.

“Ouch!” Alex laughed. “That *bad* to hurt!”

He quickly checked his stats. He remained at seventy-five out of one hundred health after killing half the ogres. Suddenly, a magic portal appeared on the far side of the room, and a huge, fancily dressed ogre stepped through.

“Should have seen that coming,” Dax said. “What good is temple without a cleric?”

“Watch my back!” Alex yelled as he used a Fatal Fling to throw his axe across the room into the cleric’s chest. The cleric died before he could cast his first spell, but the special feat left Alex unarmed with six ogres around him. To make things worse, the Confusion spell ended right then, and the remaining ogres focused their attention on the Axeman.

“Are you crazy?” Dax complained. He cast a Slow spell to buy Alex some time. The spell slowed the ogres to half their speed for a few seconds. Alex rushed through the big hairy beasts to get at his axe, but even slowed, the ogres hit him enough to take his health down to fifteen. Dax tried to even things out by using Fingers of Fire to burn the ogres between him and Alex. Arcs of flame shot from his character’s fingertips into the group of monsters. Two died. Two kept after Alex. Two turned and went after Dax.

A worried look came over Dax’s face. “Uh ... Alex, a little help here?”

“You wizards,” Alex laughed as his character picked up his axe. “Hand to hand, you’d lose against a paper bag.”

Alex chopped into his ogres, dispatching them easily before rushing to save Dax. Alex’s health had dropped to seven, but Dax had gone from one hundred to thirty-three after just two hits. Alex slammed into the last two ogres from behind, finishing them off before they could turn to fight. As they fell, both teens sighed.

“Why did you throw your axe at him?” Dax asked.

“We didn’t know how powerful he was,” Alex explained. “I didn’t want to risk it.”

“I can’t believe you can only carry an axe. I mean, if I were a real weapon master, I’d still have a dagger or something as backup.”

“It’s called a weapon master for a reason. You get to master *one* weapon. I chose the axe because I’m an Axeman!” Alex was referring to the name of his band, The Axemen, in which he was the lead guitarist and unofficial band leader. “Besides they wouldn’t give me Fatal Fling if I could, like, use it and then just pull out another weapon. I could just Fatal Fling at every enemy until I ran out of weapons to throw. The character would be too powerful.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But, man, I’ve never seen someone use an Axeman like you. You’re crazy, but the stuff you do works. And you never seem to use the same moves twice.”

“Always keep them guessing,” Alex explained. “People, and a lot of the games nowadays, figure out your habits. So I always try to do something different. But you’re right. I got da mad skillz, dude!” Alex laughed, and Dax laughed with him.

“It shouldn’t really surprise me that you do so well at these games, I guess,” Dax commented. “You’ve seen, like, every movie, played every RPG, and you’ve read what ... like a thousand books?”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Alex teased. “It’s only like nine fifty.”

Alex, an eleventh grader, stood at above-average height with a slim but sturdy body. His straight blonde hair hung evenly around his head almost like a skirt, and his long face usually held a smirk since Alex tended to be a wise guy. A T-shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers made up his typical outfit along with his red wristwatch on his right arm and a studded leather cuff on his left. On this day, Alex wore his orange shirt with the band's logo—a yellow *A* with lightning bolts on either side that looked almost like wings. Behind the *A* lay Alex's instrument—his guitar—in red. Alex loved his music but not as much as swords and sorcery. He'd been a fan of the latter since the age of six and had collected enough books, cards, movies, and toys to open his own store.

Slightly shorter than Alex, Dax stood at about the same height as most of the girls in their grade, which he hated since he preferred shorter women. His mother kept his brown hair in a kind of crew cut, which made him look like a cross between a soldier and punk rocker. At least it gave him character.

Dax owned the game console, so the guys typically hung out at his place. His room was one large mess, and getting set to play video games usually involved shoving clothes off Dax's double bed first. These clothes were usually a mixture of one or two day-old shirts and pants, and the neatly folded pile of clean clothes that Dax's mom had left to be put away. The floor was a minefield of dirty underwear and socks that visitors were careful to avoid. The light blue walls of the room hid behind the multitude of posters and pictures that Dax had pinned, tacked, and even stapled on them. Most were movie posters like *Spider-Man* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but some pop stars and video game ads hung scattered among them, as well as magazine cutouts of the movie stars, TV shows, and toys he liked. Dax essentially surrounded himself with one big commercial for everything every kid had ever wanted to see or own.

Alex stared at their two video game characters on the TV screen. They stood patiently in the room with ogre bodies all around them, occasionally glancing up to look out at Dax and Alex as they waited for commands. "That would be a great life, you know."

"Fighting monsters every day?" Dax asked. "It could get boring."

Alex quickly responded. "Not just fighting monsters, not even fighting monsters. The adventures, the fame, the freedom to be out exploring. Wouldn't you love to have that kind of life?"

"Me? Not really. I like my life. I like my video games. I like my thirty-inch flat screen, and I get, like, a billion channels on cable. Things are pretty good the way they are."

"I dunno," Alex sighed. "I just think I should be doing something more. You know, like I'm destined for something big."

"I thought that was the plan," Dax replied. "Your band gets a contract, puts out an album. Next thing you know, you're on a world tour."

"That's assuming my parents let me go on a tour. Can you imagine a rock star with like a ten o'clock curfew?"

Dax chuckled. "Yeah, that'd suck."

"I hate that my parents are so strict. I want to go on a big trip to someplace I've never even heard of—no restrictions and no parental supervision. I keep having this feeling like something big is gonna happen, but the only thing in my future right now is that history exam tomorrow morning."

"Speaking of which, did you bring the notes from last period?"

"Do you ever take notes?" Alex asked as he reached into his book bag and grabbed his notes. "Or do you just copy everyone else's?"

"Copy pretty much," Dax smiled. When he saw that Alex wasn't smiling back, his grin vanished. Alex looked depressed. Dax needed to cheer him up.

"Look, Alex, it's not that bad. You gotta look at it the way I do. We're only sixteen, and we've got it pretty good right now. After this exam, we're off for summer vacation and can do whatever we want for two months. (You till 10:00 PM, me till 11:00 PM.) Would it be cool if, say, a spaceship landed in my backyard and took me away for a Star Wars kinda adventure? Or wouldn't it be cool if I had aliens living in my closet? Sure. Is it likely to happen? Nope. Seriously, how many sixteen-year-olds out there are off on grand adventures of any kind? And who knows? Sometime soon, someone could come running in and tell you you've got the audition of a lifetime, and it could make you a star."

Just then Tanya Krowski burst through the door of Dax's room, startling both boys. Tanya was the keyboardist of The Axemen. A slim, petite, spunky girl with short spiked red hair and blue eyes, she had a love of tight jeans and cutoff shirts.

"Dax!" she exclaimed. "Have you seen—oh, Alex! You're here. You'll never guess what happened. Actually, don't even try. I'll just tell you. We got an audition with Shadowland Productions. It's our big break, the one that could make us stars!"

Alex and Dax sat silently, mouths opened, exchanging glances for several seconds before Dax yelled, "Damn, I'm good!"

Alex jumped off the bed, rushing to Tanya and grabbing her arms.

"Are you serious? When did this happen?"

"Just an hour ago," she replied. "I tried to call you on your cell."

"I turn it off during game time," Alex explained. "No distractions."

Tanya gave him that video-games-are-*not*-that-important look that girls usually give.

"Anyways," Alex continued. "When's the audition?"

"Tomorrow morning. 9:00 AM."

"You're kidding?" Dax jumped in.

Tanya looked confused. "No. Is that a problem?"

Alex let her go and dropped his head. "Our history final is tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM. Can we reschedule?"

Tanya then gave him her are-you-kidding-me looks and said, "You want me to tell a producer from Shadowland Productions, 'I'm sorry, but tomorrow morning just isn't good for us. Would you mind rescheduling? How's next Tuesday?'" She glared, adding, "Are you nuts?"

Dax lay on his stomach on the bed with his chin propped up on his fists, smiling at the situation. “Dude, you’re screwed.”

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“That’s it, Little Rose,” Mornak encouraged while the energy collected between Dara’s hands. She knelt on the grass in the palace gardens; her yellow floral dress spread around her like a sunflower.

Dara was proving herself a good student, but she still had a few years to go before she could be properly trained. Nonetheless, magic was in her blood, passed down to her from her parents just as her father’s power had been passed to him from both his parents. Some said that Mornak’s powerful potential came from the mix of wizard blood. Most wizards did not marry other wizards, and while they could become friends and allies, a rivalry almost always developed between spell casters that prevented them from getting too close to one another. They feared having their secrets stolen or being seen as *number two* in the pair. Because of this, most wizards chose to practice the arts alone and only took an apprentice to carry on their legacy. Fear also made them train only one apprentice at a time. Jealousy could spark if one student considered the other the master’s favourite. (Few did not know the tale of Kelnarr’s students—Tash and Zarod, and the fate to which their jealousy led them.) Mornak’s parents were different though. Just like Mornak and his wife, Elanni, they loved each other unconditionally; they kept no secrets from each other; and they helped each other grow as a people as well as wizards.

Mornak saw much of his wife in Dara: her curiosity, her sassiness, the way she saw the beauty in everything around her. He still missed Elanni greatly. She died defending the realm from evil, and her death drove Mornak to create the Hall of Shadows. He did not want anyone else to lose a loved one to evil as he had. More precisely, he feared that one day he might lose Dara in the same way if he didn’t do something. But now, it looked as though his precautions may have been for nothing. He didn’t know who or what this shadowman was, but if he was trying to unlock the Hall of Shadows—if he could find a way to get inside or let what lived inside it out—then the realm would be plunged into darkness again, and it would, most likely, be worse than before.

Almost a year had passed since Mornak’s encounter with the shadowman. Since then, he had been hard at work preparing. He had trained in the art of divination, the ability to see other places and sometimes other times. Through it, he had searched the realm for the shadowman, but he found no trace of him. That did not make Mornak feel any less worried. The shadowman made it clear that his powers were growing, and one particular vision of Mornak’s made him believe that he may someday be defeated by his mysterious enemy. He saw himself in what must have been the distant future, for he looked old and withered, chained to the floor of a dungeon.

Mornak could not let that come to pass. He needed to increase his own powers so that when they met again, he would be the victor. To that end, he

had created an elemental staff to augment his magic. He could cast his spells through it, and it would magnify their power. More importantly, with the staff, he could create creatures from the elements at hand—such as bears made of fire, snakes made of water, and even sand soldiers. The staff could only be used this way once a day, and the elementals would only last a few minutes. But they behaved just like the creatures they looked like, and they obeyed all Mornak's commands. To make sure he didn't face the shadowman alone next time, he also created magic horseshoes for all the Axemen's steeds. If the knights were needed, they could accompany Mornak to Shadow Wood.

And then there was Dara. A wizard didn't usually start training another until the apprentice reached the age of thirteen, but Mornak did not know if or when he might need Dara's assistance. That was why she had a small colourful magic ball of light in her hands. Seconds later, it became a butterfly. Mornak smiled. The girl was a natural summoner.

"I love making butterflies!" Dara giggled as the insect took flight through the garden.

"Remember, you didn't make the butterfly. You summoned it from somewhere else. When you grow up, you'll be able to summon a book, or your horse, or even a person. Just remember that it's easier to summon people who want to be summoned. If they don't, they can usually resist and stay right where they are," Mornak explained, as he pulled a scroll out from an ornate box. "Now, I have something special for you. Wondrous magic ... if you can read it." He handed her the scroll, which she eagerly opened.

Her face scrunched up as she looked at the parchment. Its words made no sense to her, but she'd done this before. The words were tones of power. Pronouncing them correctly, and in order, either cast a spell that they formed or unlocked magic stored in the scroll. She mouthed them first, trying out the sounds in her mind. Then she spoke them. "*Ana shi ka rei ful. Shumen ro sakra mali.*"

The scroll began to glow as its magic activated. The glow then pulled away from the scroll like a huge teardrop of purple water to splash onto the ground, disappearing in a bright flash. A glowing purple puppy happily wagging its tail sat where the teardrop had landed.

"A puppy!" Dara exclaimed. "Can I keep—" She caught on then and pouted. "Aw, he's not real. He's not summoned. He's conferred."

"Conjured," Mornak corrected, chuckling to himself.

"Conjured," Dara repeated. "How long is he here for?"

"For one day, Little Rose," Mornak answered.

Just then a knight walked up to them. "I've have returned from the Wood, my king," he announced. "I am happy to report no unusual activity."

"Very good, Senufer," the king replied, "but I told you to call me Mornak in private. Have we not been friends for two decades?"

"That would be improper, my king," the man replied with a wink.

Senufer Praxis was the leader of the Axemen and Mornak's right hand. Next to Mornak, he was probably the most respected man in Aspiria, respect

gained through his deeds as well as his outstanding skill. A mountain of a man, Senufer stood a head taller than Mornak and was very muscular—but not so much that it restricted his movements. He kept his head shaved so enemies could not grab his hair during battle, and he sported a tightly trimmed goatee. Like all Axemen, he wore armour of brown leather with a bronze chest plate, as well as bronze knee, ankle, wrist, and elbow guards. This gave him great freedom of movement while protecting vital areas. Engraved in the chest plate shone the Axemen insignia: an axe with two lighting bolts on either side, almost like wings.

The man was an imposing individual except to a certain few.

“Hi, Uncle Senufer!” Dara exclaimed, hugging his waist.

The Axeman picked her up and hugged her back. “Hello, Little Rose. Are you having fun?”

“Yep yep,” Dara answered. “I made a puppy!”

“So I see,” he remarked. Though Dara and Senufer had no blood relation, she had known him all her life, and they treated each other as family. “You are becoming quite the little wizard. Maybe next year your father can step down, and you can take over as queen.”

“I’m too young, Uncle Senufer,” Dara giggled. “Besides, I’ve seen what Papa does. It’s far too much work. I’m going to stay a princess forever!”

Senufer laughed. “I wish you could. In any case, I doubt you’d make a good queen.”

Dara looked at him in shock. “Uncle Senufer, that’s mean! Why would you say that?”

“Real queens are very proper,” Senufer explained. “They don’t giggle when you do this.” He began tickling her tummy, making her laugh and squirm in his arms.

“Uncle Senufer!” Dara squealed through her giggling. “Stop. I give up. I give up!”

Senufer placed her back on the ground. “When you can pass the tickle test, you will be ready to be queen,” he announced with an official tone as he placed his hand to his heart.

“Yes, Sir Knight,” Dara curtsied with the same seriousness before both of them broke into laughter.

Dara’s puppy whined then, drawing their attention.

“Go play with him,” Mornak told her. Needing no further prompting, Dara and the puppy rushed off together at once, running through the gardens.

Mornak and Senufer watched her go.

“I don’t ever want her to grow up,” Mornak sighed, “and at the same time she’s not growing up fast enough in the face of this threat.”

Senufer nodded. “Her skills are surprising for her age.”

“Indeed,” Mornak agreed. “I only hope I have the time to teach her offensive and defensive spells.”

“It has been months since you saw the shadowman,” Senufer stated. “Are you sure he will return?”

Mornak nodded. "I could sense it was no idle threat. He is preparing himself, and so, I have been as well."

"I have not seen you so unnerved since some time before the Hall went up," Senufer commented.

"Because this man has some connection to it, but what it is, I cannot imagine."

"And you fear defeat so much you that feel Dara must be trained so early?" the knight questioned.

"I am being prudent," Mornak stated. "It is better to err on the side of caution. Magical fail-safes are in place to give Dara access to my spell books and magical items. She will have all she needs if the worst should come to pass."

"While I always trust in your wisdom, King Mornak," Senufer commented, "I hope, this time, you are being overcautious."

"As do I, my friend," Mornak agreed.

Senufer saluted and then returned to his duties. Mornak turned his attention back to Dara. He smiled as he watched her and her magical puppy, and then he smiled to himself. He'd been using his powers to help her focus hers. She still lacked enough experience to do proper summoning on her own. The scroll spell, however—she did that naturally. If it came down to it, she would be his fail-safe—the realm's fail-safe.

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At 6:00 PM, Alex rode his bike home from Dax's place. The end of June meant long warm days and no more school. Classes had ended already, as had all of his exams, except history. A few hours ago, he had been looking forward to a great vacation for the next two months. Now he could only think about tomorrow. The Black Eyed Peas played on Alex's iPod Nano as he rode, but he didn't even hear it. His mind was trying to deal with his dilemma. If he went to his exam, he'd make it through another year of school—a year closer to freedom (unless he went to college, in which case it would be a year closer to another four-year sentence and then freedom). If he went to the audition, he might be able to bypass all that and become a rock star right away. Of course, if the audition didn't go well, then he would have failed the exam for nothing and would have to repeat a year of school—as well as endure the wrath of his parents.

Alex wasn't unintelligent, but this year his mind had often drifted with thoughts of a bigger purpose, which had brought his grades down. Many of his teachers recommended that he repeat the year since all his marks so far were just above the passing level; some marks reached that level only because his teachers liked him. His parents had made a deal that if he could show renewed focus on this next exam, he would be allowed to move to the next grade. Passing, and his parents' trust and respect, now hinged on this exam, and Tanya had just told him that he should skip it.

On top of that, this audition might be the big thing he felt approaching. He had the nagging feeling that he was meant to be somewhere else and that he could do it if he could just get out of—out of—*Out of what?* he wondered. *School? The city? The country?* He felt trapped, trapped in a life that should be so much more. It had been this way for three years now—a hollow feeling. He knew what caused it—everyone knew. It was why his teachers were so lenient, but he thought that by now, the feeling would have gone away or at least faded. It only felt stronger.

He pulled into his driveway and parked his bike in the garage of his house—a typical two-storey, four-bedroom suburban home that looked almost exactly like every other house on the street. He walked in to be greeted immediately by his mother's voice.

"Alex!" she called from somewhere upstairs. "Take out the trash before you get settled in."

"Yes, Mom," he called back. "Bigger purpose ... greater destiny ... trash boy," he mumbled as he carried the bags to the curb.

He returned inside only to hear his mom again. "Did you remember the recycling?"

"Crap," he muttered as he went to find the recycling bin.

A while later, he entered his room. His history books lay on his desk. He needed to study. His guitar leaned against the wall. He needed to practice. A warm summer breeze wafted through his open window. He needed to escape. He went with studying. Surprisingly, Alex enjoyed this year's history course so much so that he'd gone out and gotten some books from the library on his own. One in particular, which he had just started reading, examined figures from different eras and different places around the world and cited evidence that some of these legendary and mythical people may have really existed. In *Legend and Lore*, he had just begun reading the life story of a Roman legionnaire named Scorpius who had a knack for strategy. A portrait of him appeared at the beginning of his chapter. He looked to be about the same age as Alex, perhaps a year older. With short brown hair and a sturdy yet not-too-muscular body, Scorpius had a serious look about him that said, "All work and no play." His armour consisted of a chest plate and bronze shoulder guards. A leather kilt protected his upper legs while tough leather boots protected his shins and feet. He wore bronze wrist guards and held his sword, a gladius, and his large rectangular shield, a scutum; he was ready for battle. Alex couldn't wait to see how Scorpius applied his tactical talent as he grew up. He picked up the book, knowing he shouldn't read it now. He had his texts to study, but he still felt drawn to this book. In a hundred years, or a thousand, would he be in a similar book, or would he be forgotten by history like so many millions of others? Then he chuckled to himself. *What would his story be? The Taker Outer of Trash ... and Recyclables!*

He tossed the book aside, deciding to reread his class notes. He was lost in the war of 1812 (and wondering what it would be like to experience a war firsthand) when his mom called him down for dinner; he welcomed the break.

Unlike many TV generation families who watched while eating, Alex's father insisted they eat at the table so that they could connect as a family each night.

"Just one more exam, eh, Alex?" his dad mentioned.

"Yeah. Tomorrow," Alex answered. "History."

"I'll bet you can't wait until that exam is history!" his dad said, laughing at his own joke.

Alex and his mom rolled their eyes.

"And after that, I guess it's band practice and video games every day?" His dad continued. "Who knows? Maybe you'll become a rock star, and then your old man can retire and live off your success."

Alex knew he was joking, but he hoped some truth hid in the statement. "You'd be okay with me becoming a rock star?" he asked.

"A rich rock star, yes," his dad replied.

"Now, James," his mom interrupted. "Don't go giving him ideas. He's got to finish school before he even thinks about something like that."

"Why?" Alex asked. "Aren't I just going to school to, like, get a career and make money so I can live comfortably? If I become a rock star, then I'll have plenty of money to live comfortably off—and so will you."

"Kid's got a point," his dad noted before he shoved some mashed potatoes in his mouth.

"Stop it, James!" his mom scolded. "Alex, it's not that easy to become a famous musician or actor or something like that. If it were, then everyone would be doing it. And the thing about fame is it can go as quickly as it comes. What if you just have one hit and that's it?"

"Yeah," Alex's dad agreed. "Remember those New Kids in the House? Whatever happened to them? You never hear about them at all anymore. They can't still be kids. And don't even get me started on that Britney girl. Now Celine—"

Before his dad could veer off topic, Alex's mom jumped in. "The point is," she said, "you need a solid career to fall back on if the rock star thing doesn't work. We don't want to see you out of work at forty with no money and no job prospects because your music career fell through."

"And we sure don't want you living here!" Alex's dad laughed.

"James!" his mom scolded again and then turned back to Alex. "Honey, you know you're always welcome here, but—"

"But we'd prefer if you got your own place by then!" His dad jumped in. "No offense," he added with a wink. "I don't know why we're even worrying about it now. It's not like you've got some record producer offering you a deal."

Alex did his best not to choke on his food.