

## Chapter 12

### Explanations

She floated in and out of darkness and dreams, not knowing what was happening, nor even caring. Blissful sleep, rest so pure it felt as if she were floating on clouds, had for the most part taken over her body so she lay helpless and unconscious as the world turned by around her. Occasionally a dim part of her mind would make the attempt to drag itself from the clutches of the dreamland, trying to find reality and pull Brittany back to consciousness, but she fought off this instinct and allowed herself to slip back into the peaceful dreams of better times in the past.

She was being carried, her body jostled about so she awoke just a little. The world seemed a dim blur around her, cloudy and incoherent. A few faces moved in front of her line of vision, dim spectres she was almost too tired to recognize. Lazarus, Mal'Zyn, but it was impossible they were here around her. Wasn't she caught by the Dark Lord, and weren't they somewhere in the dungeons? It made no sense, so Brittany gratefully drifted back into slumber.

She awoke again, with no idea of how long she had slept. All was dark, but this seemed not to just be an illusion of her sleep-addled brain. She was still so very tired, and her left arm seemed to burn with an inner fire, so she stayed where she was, laying down on something very soft, apparently a cushion or mattress of some sort. Before she could manage her goal of drifting back to sleep, however, she heard hushed voices close by.

"Still watching over her?" The voice was unmistakably that of a woman, but Brittany had no idea whose it could be. She heard no reply, at least no verbal one, but the woman continued. "How valorous. How long has this vigil been going on? A week? Two? I am beginning to seriously doubt she will ever awaken."

Another person replied, but his words were so quiet Brittany could not at first make out what he was saying. She was a little surprised when she realized the man was Mal'Zyn, and after a bit his words grew loud enough for her to listen to.

"...does not matter." he was saying. "My sense of honor compels me to remain here, something which I am beginning to see you know very little of."

"I know your words are an insult," the woman replied, her voice raising in volume just a little. "but I shall not take offense this time. It is true what you say. You have heard of my past, of some of the things I have done. I do not pretend to be anyone other than the person I am, no matter how others dislike it."

Brittany knew she should be wondering who this woman was and why she was on such familiar terms with the Nephyrum, but she was so tired, and it was all she could do just to keep awake and make sense of their words.

“Why are you still here?” he asked, his voice growing a little louder as well. “You can leave any time you want. The passage has been open ever since we arrived here.”

“Call me an interested spectator in this whole business.” the woman replied. “I have no pressing issues at the moment, and this is so much more interesting than trying to get back in the good graces of my former employers.”

“The ones who put you in the dungeons in the first place?” Mal’Zyn asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. We have had some disagreements, but they did pay very well. Besides, if I hadn’t been in the dungeons, you would still be there with all your little companions.”

“Whatever help you provided might have been welcomed by the rest of this group, but I would have rather gone to my grave with the last shattered vestiges of my honor intact.” he said, his voice becoming deathly quiet.

“So you say. Anyway, I will leave you to watch over your slumbering maiden. I have heard of your fighting skills. If you ever want some competition or exercise, you know where to find me.” With that, the woman walked off, her footsteps ringing out loudly against the floor which sounded as if it were covered in tile. Silence reigned after she had moved away, although Brittany knew that Mal’Zyn was still nearby.

The conversation being over, Brittany did not even try to talk to the Nephyrum, but instead allowed her tired brain to rest some more and fell back asleep.

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She awoke once more, pulling her mind out of the peaceful dreams and into reality. This time Brittany managed to remain awake and sat up a little, peering about to see where she was.

To her surprise, the surroundings were not those of a cell inside the Dark Lord’s dungeons. She was laying in a very large bed that was decorated with an impressive amount of pillows and blankets. The room around her was almost too bright for her tastes, the daylight streaming in through large windows that lined two entire walls. The room itself was curved, with a few narrow columns in the center that stretched up to the high ceiling.

There were a few couches and chairs scattered about the rest of the room, and one large table filled with platters of food which really caught her attention, her underfed stomach protesting loudly at the mere sight of the food.

As she attempted to climb out of the bed, noticing that now she was wearing a type of light shift (which was odd, as she hadn't been wearing one before), Brittany had a good look through the large windows. She did not know where she was, but she was most certainly not in the tunnels anymore, unless they had discovered some magickal realm inside the Earth, which was not feasible. But with the strange, magickal situation she had found herself drawn into, Brittany corrected herself, a magickal land inside the earth might not be too far from the truth, whatever the hell that was.

Large mountains rose all around the windows, some with snow at their peaks. Their bases were all heavily forested, as if the mountains were ringed around in a thick green carpet. The room she was in appeared to be quite high up, and if she stretched a little to look down, Brittany could see a river meandering through the trees into a large lake surrounded by some small dwellings. The scene as a whole seemed to have been taken directly out of a painting, and Brittany was a little disappointed that there was no King here to greet her to the Land of the elves, which this would probably resemble to a high degree. Glancing around the room once more, Brittany realized that although there was no elf-king here to welcome her, there was another elf around. A short, belligerent, half-drunken elf.

"Welcome back to the land of the living." Dobby greeted her before taking a pull from a massive bottle of some unidentified liquor. "You have been gone from it long enough."

"Oh, wonderful." Brittany replied sarcastically as she moved over to where Dobby sat by the table laden with food. "I might have preferred sleep, or even the Dark Lord."

"Bitch." Dobby replied, taking another drink and managing to spill only a little of it on his dirty rags of clothes. "Now that you are back from your vacation in dream-land, you have to get back to work against the Dark Lord. Not that you made much progress the first time." He finished by sorting through the food on the table and grabbing a chicken leg, before gulping it down in a few noisy bites.

"I didn't see you offering much help," she replied, sitting down by the table and searching for something to quell her loud stomach. "but whatever. Where are we?"

"We have finally arrived at our planned destination." Lazarus said, coming into the room and sitting in one of the couches. He was also carrying a red bathrobe which he handed to

Brittany. She gratefully took it and pulled it over her lightly covered body. “I believe we mentioned to you about the safeholds before we were forced to enter the tunnels, which contrary to Dobby’s expectations, we did emerge from alive and relatively unscathed, with the sole exception of you, who took a vicious beating from the Dark Lord.”

“Good thing I was unconscious for most of it, then.” Brittany remarked.

“You were unconscious for a far longer period of time than just the Dark Lord.” Lazarus remarked. “You have been asleep for about three weeks, if not longer.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun, I guess.” Brittany replied, helping herself to some more fruit from the table, including some small orange fruits which she had not seen before but which were nonetheless extremely tasty. “So how did you guys get out of the dungeons and get me to this place? I figured you couldn’t have gotten past those dark creatures.”

“We had some help.” the sorcerer admitted. “The other prisoners had somehow managed to get through their cells and riot, distracting the guards and freeing us as well. There was one person, a woman by the name of Perfection, who was of particular aid in that she discovered the creatures’ weaknesses.”

At the mention of this woman, Brittany recalled a little the earlier conversation she had heard between Mal’Zyn and apparently Perfection. But she did not really remember the details of the incident, for she had been so tired and her mind was still somewhat groggy from her three-week slumber.

“We can meet her later to hear her explanation of the escape from the dungeons,” Lazarus was saying. “but to give you a short version, we left the dungeons and attacked the Dark Lord, managing to drive him back and rescuing you in the process. From all appearances, he then left the tunnels as well, taking his army of night with him.”

“He also took the dragon and the artifacts.” Brittany spoke up, and then detailed a little of what the Dark Lord told her, about those objects being necessary for some reason in order to perform the rite of El’Ran’Kasheen, and that there were still more artifacts the Dark Lord needed to claim. She also remembered the small detail the Dark Lord mentioned about not all the artifacts being on Earth, and told that to them as well.

Lazarus nodded in response to her words, as if they confirmed what he had suspected all along.

“That would make sense.” he said after a moment. “Although we knew the Dark Lord had left, we did not know why. Now we have at least some idea of what he is after, even if we

don't know how or why he plans to use those objects.”

“Do you know where he went?” Brittany asked. “There are probably a lot of planets out there.”

“Yes, but luckily for us, I managed to feel the magickal waves produced by the Dark Lord's portal. That information gave me at least an idea of his destination, and since then I have narrowed the possibilities down to two planets that lie close to each other in a far-away galaxy.”

“So how do we get there?” Brittany asked, knowing that they were obligated for some reason to track down the Dark Lord and defeat him.

“Dobby and I are able to work together to create a portal which should take us directly there, and there are also gates or passages that lead out from the safehold into Earth, from which it will be easier to work, but we have no need to go rushing into danger.” he said. “We have already been delayed about three weeks, so a few more days should not matter very much. It should take the Dark Lord some time to gather whatever objects he still requires in the rite, and he is still missing the most important element in the ritual.”

“Which is me.” Brittany stated.

“Exactly.” Lazarus replied. “Even if he collects all of the necessary implements, he can do nothing until he finds you, so we are safe here, for a time at least.”

“Then why not stay here so he can't find us?” Brittany asked.

“It is not that simple. We are not able to stay here forever, even if it could defend against a possible attack, which the safehold is not meant to do. Even if the Dark Lord isn't immortal yet, he is still powerful and growing in strength all the time. Eventually he would move his forces to the safehold and capture us again.”

“And we will probably won't be able to escape a second time.” Brittany added.

“Exactly.” Lazarus finished, and then continued on a tangent after a few moments of silence. “But there will be time enough in the next few days to talk of these matters. For now you should just rest from the Dark Lord's beating, and perhaps acquaint yourself with the safehold. There are a number of things here which might interest you.”

“I believe I shall do that.” Brittany replied as Lazarus stood up to leave. As he was on the edge of the doorway, the sorcerer stopped and turned back towards where Brittany sat.

“You would also probably want to go speak with Mal'Zyn and inform you are awake.” he said. “The Nephyrum has taken an interest in you, it seems. He watched over you for much of the time you were unconscious.”

Brittany knew that, but refrained from saying that for not wanting to go through the explanations of how she had woken up earlier. She informed Lazarus she would go tell Mal'Zyn as soon as possible, and asked where he would be.

"I believe our companion is training out on the rooftop terrace," he replied. "There is a staircase straight down the hall from this door, and then it is up three flights of stairs." With that he left with Dobby. For a few minutes Brittany just slowly meandered through the immense room, until she discovered a set of clothes laid out for her in one of the corners, folded up on a small couch.

Dressing herself properly in what she was enthused to discover was black leather, Brittany left her room and moved down the hall towards where Lazarus said this staircase was to be found. From the looks of the hall, she was in some type of castle, seen from the large rough-cut stone blocks that made up the walls, and the tapestries that hung sporadically along the walls. On an impulse Brittany looked behind one of the hangings to see if it concealed a hidden passageway, but there was only the same light colored stone. Brittany could not help but be just a little disappointed by this, for her experience in fantasy literature clearly asserted the fact that castles held more secret passageways than they did real passageways, and that to travel in one of the normal hallways was to invite an assassination attempt, which of course would have then been avoided by jumping into one of the myriad secret passages. Ah well. There were probably other passages around in this building somewhere.

The hallway ended with a doorway, which Brittany opened to find a narrow circular staircase leading upward, and so began to climb. A hundred steps later and Brittany realized that perhaps this was not the best idea so soon after her attack from the Dark Lord. She had still not reached the second floor landing, and seriously contemplated going back down to her room and from there back to bed. However, some stupid part of her brain still insisted on finishing the climb, and so aching with weariness, she did so.

In the end, it took just over two hundred and fifty steps to reach the rooftop. Brittany paused at the top of the landing, exhausted and cursing whatever idiot had designed this castle and its stairs. Eventually she regained her breath and looked around the rooftop. It was quite large, showing an amazing view of the surrounding world. Looking behind her, Brittany saw even more towers and rooftops rising far above her current location, some adorned with bright flags that were idly waving in the slow wind. Brittany resolved never to climb those towers.

Moving out onto the rooftop terrace, Brittany finally caught sight of Mal'Zyn at the far

end, quite close to the edge. He was going through a series of intricate motions with both of his swords, the blades gleaming in the sun. He had his shirt off, and his spiral tattoos stood out darkly against his white skin, Brittany noticing they covered his chest, shoulders, and shoulder blades.

Slowly moving through various stances, alternatively thrusting and blocking with his blades, Mal'Zyn continued to move about the rooftop in intricate motions as Brittany approached. She was sure the Nephyrum was aware of her presence, even though he gave no sign he had seen her. When she was quite close he finally stopped, an act so graceful it was as if he had been intending to stop all along and she merely witnessed it, rather than it being because of her. He offered a quick bow as he moved over to a nearby bench and placed his swords on it.

"I see you have arisen." he said simply.

"Yes." Brittany replied. "I heard you watched over me for much of the time I was unconscious. Thank you, I guess."

"It was nothing." he replied. "Any honorable person of my race would have done the same." He motioned for her to sit on the bench if she wished, moving his two swords out of the way to clear some space for her. Brittany sat, relieved to be off her feet, but Mal'Zyn remained standing.

"I'll admit that I am a little surprised to see you here." she said. "I figured you would have gone back to Zul'Kanis to remain with your race."

"I cannot go back." Mal'Zyn said. "As I said weeks ago in the dungeons, my honor was ruined. Not only did I allow myself to be captured, but the object of our search, the Dragon, was taken away once more by the Dark Lord."

"So you will never go back?" she asked.

"No." He answered simply. "Even if we recover the dragon, I believe it will be far too late to help the city. The backup generators are sure to have failed by now, leaving the city without power. Even if I do bring the Dragon back, I will be called to account and my exile will be upheld, if I am not given a harsher penalty."

"You mean they might kill you?" she asked a bit incredulously.

"Perhaps. As I said in the dungeons, it was once the norm. But that does not matter. I am not afraid to die. Indeed, you may not fully understand this, but living as I am now without honor is in many ways worse than death."

"So what will you do now?" Brittany asked, getting to her feet. "I am sure it would help

our cause to have you along for the ride.”

“Yes.” he almost whispered, before addressing her. “I will ally myself to your cause. It is the only way I will be able to regain my honor, even if it means breaking with my race.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“In pledging myself to your service, I must forsake all ties that bound me to my race. In order to regain my personal sense of honor, I must complete the exile that will be my sentence. I can no longer be a Nephyrum. From this point on I am nothing.”

“That seems a tad depressing.” Brittany commented, knowing that her words were probably spoiling this moment of great symbolic importance.

“It might seem to be that way for you.” he replied, moving over to stand by the ledge overlooking the landscape, “But I feel as if it is a new chance at living.”

Brittany forced her aching muscles to get up and moved over by the Albino, looking down at the landscape. The large lake she had seen earlier was directly below them, so close to the castle wall that Brittany could have dropped a stone in the water if she had one or felt the need to do so. As she peered down at the lake, Brittany saw the small dwellings by it in more detail. Instead of a few isolated farmhouses or cottages, the dwellings seemed to comprise a small village. She could barely make out minuscule figures running through dirt streets, signs that this safehold held others in addition to just them. It made her curious as to who those people were and why they were living here, but she knew they would most likely not have the time to go down into that village and mingle with the crowd.

She must have said something to that effect, for Mal’Zyn suddenly offered a reply.

“Yes, it is all exceptionally beautiful.” he said, gazing at the tree-covered mountains that seemed to completely surround the castle and the lake. “This safehold is only the second time I have been outside of the tunnels of my race.”

“Really?” Brittany asked, glancing at him. “You mean you never left them?”

“Only once,” he confirmed. “and that was when I was very young. The world, even this world, seems extremely large.”

“It has its good points, although right now I do not really know what they are.” she responded, turning away to look back at the rising castle walls behind them. She noticed Dobby moving towards them, and had to wonder just how the little bastard made it all the way up those stairs. He probably knew of some shortcut that made it extremely easy, like an elevator or a secret passageway that contained a ramp up to the roof.



“What do you want?” she asked as Dobby came closer to where they stood.

“My master says you should come down to the main hall as soon as possible.” Dobby replied. “Now that you are up and about, that mercenary chick says she will tell you her story.”

Brittany felt more than saw Mal’Zyn tense up at the mention of the woman, Perfection or whatever her name was.

“What is it?” she asked, wondering what it was about the woman that made him uncomfortable.

“Albino-boy doesn’t take too well to her.” Dobby felt the need to explain the situation. “Probably from sexual frustration, in my opinion.” he smirked.

“Go fuck yourself, Dobby.” Brittany had forgotten just how much fun that was to say. It felt so good, she considered repeating it.

“Well, being a servant is a very hands-on type of job.” Dobby said, offering a short nasty laugh, before running away out of their presence. Now he was gone, Brittany turned back to Mal’Zyn.

“God, I want to strangle that little bastard.” Brittany muttered as she watched the albino pick up his swords. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, it does not matter.” he said, finding his dark shirt and pulling it back on. “Perfection and I just have very different lifestyles that are sometimes...difficult to reconcile.”

“Well, can you at least guide me to the main hall? I have no idea where it is, and I think getting down all those steps might be a little difficult.”

“Of course.” Mal’Zyn replied. “I believe I will stay to hear her story. Most of her life is still mystery to me.”

Having strapped his sheathes back on, Mal’Zyn put away his swords and led Brittany inside.

