

## The Book

I'd gone through a lot to get here. Crossed pirate waters, demon infested lands, flown through unfriendly skies, and had traveled further underground than I cared to dwell upon - all in order to get to this world. Along the way I'd crossed well over a hundred world gates. But if this place held what I was looking for, it would all be worth it. And here was a pretty incredible place in its own right.

All around me shone a red sky which faded to yellow on my right. Everywhere within this sky floated various islands of land. Grass and trees grew on these islands and I could see water on many of them. It looked like the small ones were probably a kilometer across and while it was hard to judge, I guessed that the largest was only ten times that. Every direction I looked revealed more of these islands. Some close, some so far away as to be barely discernable. Hundreds, or more likely thousands, of miniature little worlds.

Hmm, I wondered. Aiming myself at a nearby island, I jumped. And came right back down having managed only about a ten foot leap. It would seem that some form of transportation would be required to get from here to there.

Pulling out my guide compass, the needle gently spun around and around. Evidently, I needed not just transportation. I also had to find the right island to look on as well. Pulling out Great Granpa's notes, I sat down to refamiliarize myself with some of the more esoteric notations. After a couple of hours worth of study and snacking, I got up, repacked my gear, and began looking around in earnest to see what I had to work with.

The island, with the interworld gate where I'd arrived, appeared to be one of the larger chunks of land. After wandering around for a while, I found a peculiar looking... boat dock, I suppose one could call it. It looked like a stone wharf with about a dozen evenly placed stairs leading up. For about half of them, they led up to nothing. However, the other half held peculiar looking boats tied off in mid air. The boats seemed to simply float next to the docks.

As I drew nearer, I could see that the boats were long and narrow. They also appeared to be very shallow. Rather gondola-like in appearance. Each boat seemed to be tied off to the wharf with a rope at each end. Climbing one of the stairs, I examined the craft closely for a moment but found nothing further of interest other than two peculiar batons at the rear of the boat. Each of these was about a foot and a half long and as big around as the thickest part of my thumb. Gingerly, I climbed aboard. Setting my gear down, I walked to the back, happy to note that the boat didn't sway at all but instead seemed incredibly stable.

In the back of the boat I found a couple of what appeared to be foot holds that had been covered in dust. Setting my feet in these, I sat down in the dusty bottom of the boat and picked up the two sticks. Immediately, I realized there was magic within them. After a moment, they took on a soft blue glow. Interesting but not truly helpful. As I moved to set the sticks down next to my gear, the boat lurched forward. And suddenly stopped again as it reached the limit of the ropes holding it to the wharf. Oh, control sticks.

After clearing the lines, I gingerly took up the sticks again and began experimenting around with piloting the boat. Soon, I had the boat smoothly circling this tiny world where the interworld gate was located. On my second pass around, a glint of light caused me to change the course and after only a couple of minutes I eased up next to what I'd seen. It turned out to be a reflection off

huge a marble statue of a man holding a bow with a silver lightning bolt where the arrow should have been. If the fellow's name was Zeus, this fit one of my clues and I should follow the lightning.

After searching around the statue for a while, I eventually found a half-buried nameplate. Zeus. Yes! I was still on the right track. Hopping back in the boat, I turned my gaze along the lightning bolt and set off to the island most closely aligned with it.

Several hours of flying in between islands later, I sailed over another of the larger floating pieces of land. Across from me was the top of a peculiar building which seemed to have one of the same type of peculiar boat docks. Interestingly, the building was very tall and seemed to consist only of a single, windowless spire. A very narrow spire at that. Someone had done some impressive engineering in order to build this. Tying off at the 'wharf', I walked down the steps to the little rooftop.

Mmm. At only three paces across, perhaps 'tiny' rooftop would be more accurate. With a great deal of effort I managed to lift the very solid hatch there. The opening revealed a shiny metal ladder. Sweating a little from lifting the heavy, sticky door, I slowly climbed down the metal rungs. The rungs looked newly made despite their great age. Someone had built this place to last. I stopped climbing down the rungs after only one small story because that's where they ended. The drop down from there was impressive. Across from where the ladder ended, I spotted a small ledge. Wrapping an arm through one of the rungs, I pulled out a small coin and dropped it, listening intently for the sound of it hitting.

Eventually, I gave up on hearing it strike the bottom.

Okay, there had to be a clue as to how I could continue. I certainly hoped so anyway because I hadn't brought nearly enough rope to cover a descent like this one. It was vaguely possible that my levitation spell might allow me to drop the distance without me splattering like a grape in a vat but I wasn't too optimistic about that. This world had some screwy magic that was giving me a bad feeling about casting spells here.

With a frown, I looked around again. Off to one side and directly across from the ladder was the ledge. It followed the rounded outside of the tower and ran maybe four foot across at its widest point and maybe two depth-wise. And that seemed to be my only hope of finding something here. Reaching out a foot, it felt solid enough. Taking a deep breath, I jumped over to it.

It held.

Okay, now back to the whole looking for clues thing. The wall and the ledge were both made of large white bricks that appeared to be marble. I doubted this was actually the case as marble was great for making statues but not so good for structures. Examining the walls and the ledge up close revealed nothing new. Frustrated, I raised a Diamond filter and looked around. The filter brought up the power of the great diamond and allowed me to see the underlying magic or technology within sight.

And right in front of my face was a brick with a glowing blue diamond on it. That had some interesting repercussions in my thoughts. A Diamond mark here. That meant that the clues Granpa Titus had left hadn't been his attempts to find the book. The clues had been for anyone getting into his study so that *they* could find the book. Sneaky old man.

Pushing on the brick caused it to gently slide forward revealing a space behind the next lower brick. Gingerly reaching into the opening, I found a wand. It even had a little blue diamond on the pommel. As I examined it, the thing slowly took on a blue glow just as the control sticks for the boat had. Now that was interesting. Perhaps now I could cast my spell.

However, as I raised the wand to add the otherwise unnecessary gesture to the spell, I lifted

off the ledge. A bit hastily, I lowered the wand and dropped back to the ledge. It would appear that the wand functioned pretty much like the control batons for the boat had. One of that pair controlled forward speed and direction. It seemed that I only had the up and down control. With an ear-to-ear grin I stepped off the ledge.

Long before I reached the bottom, my grin had faded and boredom had settled in. I'd been falling for a long time now. I had no idea how far I'd dropped but it had to be many, many leagues. A thought crossed my mind making me frown in consideration. Was I still on the same world? The more I thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed. The whole floating island hadn't been thick enough to encompass a drop like this. Despite that, I was still apparently falling through a tower made of white bricks. It also occurred to me that I could be in some sort of spatial loop. One in which the beginning and end were no longer accessible. For the moment I hoped I was simply in an unusually long, interworld transit corridor. Otherwise, I was in much bigger trouble.

Thankfully, it turned out to be an unusually long interworld passage. The white bricks gave way to a huge open space as I descended through peculiar lights and used the wand to gently land in what appeared to be an amphitheater made from the same material as the bricks. Above me floated thousands... tens of thousands of worlds. Illusions or holographic images of some sort. Looking over the worlds so displayed, I could just discern little lines connecting them. Then it hit me, this was a map of the Probability Maze. The *entire* Probability Maze. For a while I was too stunned to do anything other than float and stare.

Eventually, I collected my wits and landed. There was a book here somewhere. Pulling great Granpa's notes out, I began crossing out the clues I'd already used to get here. It took a while. The remaining clues didn't seem particularly helpful.

One obviously referred to this place: Beneath the great map sat those who designed the Maze. The key rests here.

The reference to some key might be helpful but this place was huge. I'd start looking around in a bit but I hoped to find something more to go on than just the fact that a key was here.

Another clue might or might not be useful here. It read: Vast is creativity. At the beginning of Titus' sign....

Unfortunately, the last part of that clue had been missing along with the bottom half of the piece of paper it had been written on. Even worse, there had been no footnotes or anything to tell where he'd gotten his information. That meant I couldn't follow his research back and find where he'd gotten the clue in the first place. And if he'd simply made up the clue, I was in the same boat regardless.

Frustrated, I walked around the huge amphitheater. Roughly figured, I imagined that at least a couple of hundred thousand people could have fit in here without being crowded. Vast is creativity. Not a lot of help in that phrase. At the beginning of Titus' sign.... I continued walking around for a while and stopped suddenly.

Titus' sign began on Regillus. He'd built the Machine in a cave and had powered it with a huge diamond. He'd taken our family symbol and name from it. I began looking around for a world or pattern of worlds I recognized. There were so many of them.

Searching, every so often I'd use the wand to float up and examine a section of the holograph or illusion more carefully. The more I sought, the more I came to think of our little empire as being very small indeed. Not insignificant, not by a long shot. But small. Regillus controlled or was strongly allied with maybe a hundred worlds. And the more I looked, the more I was convinced the number of worlds in the Maze numbered in the tens if not hundreds of thousands.

So many worlds.

And then near one edge of the map, I found a world I recognized. Balqual. An unpleasant world best known as the place where the archangel Michael destroyed the devil Baphomet. I'd gone to visit the shrine Michael's supporters raised after the battle. And if I followed that back across the worlds I'd passed to get there.... Yes! Regillus. I dropped down to directly beneath the hologram and commenced a detailed search of the area. Nothing. Recalling that raising the Diamond filter had allowed me to see previous signs, I tried raising it again.

And dropped it just as quickly.

For a long moment I simply stood there blinking as tears ran down my cheeks. I hadn't realized it but this entire place was one of vast power. Everything around me had appeared a blindingly brilliant blue-white. Eventually, the spots went away and I was able to see normally again. During that time I ate the last of the food I'd bought and drank the last of the water. If I didn't solve this puzzle soon, I was going to have to leave to resupply. This close to my goal, I truly loathed the thought of leaving. Raising the Diamond filter obviously hadn't worked, so I needed to come up with a better plan of action.

Sitting down, I relaxed and allowed my mind to drift. Getting here had not been easy. One of the worldgates had required using a pressure suit and sinking down to the bottom of an ocean. Another, I'd had to use a parasail to get through. Three worlds had been under decidedly hostile control. Two of those I'd snuck through. On the last one, I'd been forced to hack my way through a violent band of cannibalistic mutants to get to the interworld passageway. Very ugly that. In more ways than one.

I'd gone through demon controlled lands. Beaten pirates. Had a lot of fun along the way to be honest. A lot of it had also been quite tedious. The demon lands had certainly tried my patience. Still, I wouldn't have traded the experience. And it all started because I refused to give up on getting through a locked door.... My gaze turned up to the miniature Regillus floating over me. A door I'd opened by drawing the sign of the Diamond.

Grandad often said that his father had loved symmetry in all things.

Working to quell my burgeoning hope in case I was getting too far ahead of myself, I floated back up to Regillus. I began above and proceeded to draw the sign of the Diamond around the holographic representation of my family's homeworld. The diamond flared blue but instead of fading away, it shrank down into the tiny world.

And as the light sank, I fell down with it into that world.

There was no sense of disorientation. One minute I was falling toward the illusionary Regillus and the next I was standing in the room that housed the great machine.

Not sure if this was truly part of the machine's magic or not, I drew the sign of the Diamond in the air and lightly powered it. The magic flared blue and several portions of the machine flared in a return greeting. Perhaps this had been taken from my memory. Or... maybe this was real, unlikely though that seemed at the moment. Hard to tell just yet. I didn't recognize any specific features of the Machine but that wasn't really unusual. While some things within the Machine were constant, they were mostly at the center. Things on the periphery tended to change. I thought this was particularly ironic seeing as how the Machine was considered to be a great symbol for unchanging law and order within the Maze.

Walking around to an entrance that felt right, I stepped into the Machine.

Yellow lights marked a path along the floor and I followed them. It certainly felt like I was walking in the real machine. And during those walks, I'd wondered what might happen if I failed to

follow the lights. Daddy had once overheard my musings and had lectured me for three hours straight against doing so. I still wondered... but I didn't do so aloud anymore. As before, I followed the lights.

For what seemed like hours I followed the lines. Time often did peculiar things in the Machine. Eventually, the lines guided me to a ledge. Across the way was another ledge. Between them was nothing. An endless grey mist in any direction I looked. A narrow beam crossed the span as did the yellow lights. But on the beam the lights were much larger and brighter. I felt my lips compress into a grim line. Sometimes the machine did this. Required a physical test and a mental one at the same time. Each of the dots represented... I didn't know what. Most typically, they would represent memories of some sort. Powerful memories.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to enter a near trance-like state of consciousness. I could only take a moment. Standing around in the machine was dangerous. If it shifted with you inside... well, there was only rumor and speculation. And rumor had it there were still people in here who'd never come out.

I stepped out onto the beam and my foot touched the first blob of yellow light.

Rage hit me like flaming ballista bolt. What made it worse was that it was my own fury. After graduating, I'd gone to a distant world overrun by dark forces. And there I had allowed my anger at being forced to kill my own boyfriend to bubble over. My sense of hopelessness at being forced into that action had fueled my rage. I have no idea how many I killed or for how long. When I finally walked out of that world, I had felt empty. No anger, no more hopelessness, nothing. After resting a few days, I'd gone and helped get the school reorganized. It had opened for the new semester with a new staff and a new mandate.

Gritting my teeth, I took another careful step on the beam and my foot passed through the next light, extinguishing it as it did so.

Disappointment, this time. Sharp as a knife. Uncle Linden had denied my request for an apprenticeship. He was one of the most magic savvy of the entire family. For many years he'd studied the family magic. They said he had a flair for it. He'd been born of Sidhe Princess Coratina and had spent a great deal of time in the Sidhe courts where magic and those who used it abounded. When it came to various forms of magic, Uncle Linden was the real thing. Disappointment had turned to a cold anger which I had barely restrained when I asked him why. He'd looked at me and tilted his head slightly to the side and said as though surprised I'd asked, "Why because the time isn't right, of course. You've quite a lot ahead of you girl. Training with me isn't supposed to be one of your priorities." And with that he'd simply disappeared.

I still didn't know what that was supposed to have meant. Angels above, there were a lot of steps left to cross the beam. Bending down, I immediately surged up in a powerful leap. I almost cleared the beam but my foot touched the last of the big yellow lights.

Fear flooded through me. I'd had a nightmare. In this particular dream, Aunt Talia had controlled my actions somehow. She'd made me do terrible things. Horrible things. Daddy had rushed into the room then. Evidently, I'd screamed in my sleep. He tried to comfort me but it had taken me a long time to calm down. Maybe it had just been a dream. I'd heard Grandad say the night before that Talia had enough control over walking the Machine to choose the power it granted. And she'd been choosing to increase her willpower for a long time now. He said it would make her will too strong for most to resist and would add a punch to her spells that would be frightening to see. Maybe it was just a dream.

Dammit, I hated these emotional roller coasters. You just never knew what you were going

to get on a stroll through the machine.

The yellow lights had come to an end and a silvery glow formed over the entire corridor I walked down. There were a number of corridors that led elsewhere, but I stuck with the silver glow. I'd always allowed the machine to choose my path. Probably always would.

After a while, the light led me into a small shrine to the four great archangels. I'd never known there was such a place in the Machine. In front of each shrine floated a ball of silver light. Oh, dear. The four great archangels each stood for something besides being hands of the Creator. Michael represented battle. Raphael represented healing. Gabriel hope and Azrael death. There were other angels but these were the big four.

Taking a deep breath, I knelt down in front of the shrine to the archangel I prayed to the most: Raphael. The silver globe exploded in a burst of brilliant light.

And suddenly I was walking down another corridor, this one lit by green ghost lights. I had no memory of what had happened in front of Raphael's shrine or of walking to here. A little thrill of fear pulsed through me. I'd never faced a Machine challenge without remembering it most keenly. Never heard of it happening to anyone else, either. Okay, there was nothing I could do about it now. Time to refocus. I followed the drifting green lights down a corridor and up a ladder. The ladder led into an ultramodern room. In a bowl were several small glowing green grapes. Without hesitation I ate one.

A man walked into the room. He was an older man with grey in his hair and the family look about his eyes.

"Well done," he said, gesturing towards a chair. "Please, be seated." A bit reluctantly, I sat. Staying in one place went against what I knew of walking the Machine; but so did leaving a test before it was concluded.

"Thank you," I replied, sitting on the edge of a chair. "You're obviously one of the family. Who are you?"

"Indeed, I am," he agreed leaning back in a chair across from me. "My name is Titus. I'm your great grandfather."

"You're the Ascended One?" I asked quietly.

"That's me. I left the notes to see who would come looking for the book. And why. It truly is one of the great treasures. So, Clarissa, why did you come in search of the Book of Knowledge?"

"There is no greater treasure than knowledge," I answered slowly. I still wasn't entirely sure this man was dealing truth. "When I looked over the notes, I realized that just getting here would be a challenge. I like a good challenge. Especially a challenge with such a fantastic reward at the end of it."

He looked at me askance for a moment and drew the sign of the diamond in the air. It flared blue and the whole machine rang like a bell. "I am who I say I am. But you'll have plenty of time to figure that out for yourself. What will you do with the book if I allow you to take it?"

"Hmm? Well read it of course."

This caused him to laugh. A deep, rich laugh that brought a smile to my own lips despite the circumstances. "I don't think so. Not the way you're used to reading books. There's simply too much to try reading from cover to cover. Still, I like your attitude girl. Where would you keep the book?"

I frowned. "I suppose in one of my libraries...."

"Bah! Think girl. This is *the* Book of Knowledge. It is an artifact of unimaginable power. Any who learn about it are quite likely to attempt to take it. This book will need not just protection...

it will require extraordinary protection.”

My eyes narrowed in thought. He was right. “I can make a vault....”

“Yes,” he said, “Go on.”

“I can make a vault that even I couldn’t get into.”

“That’s a good start,” he prompted.

“A good start,” I said deadpan.

“Oh, hubris. How cute. And how foolish. If you’re going to take and hold an relic as powerful as the book, you’re going to have to start thinking on a larger scale. You’re going to have to protect it against demon kings and the masters of the great houses. If word leaks out, great dragons will try to take it as will mighty creatures and powerful peoples from all over creation.” Wow. And I realized in an instant that he was right. “I don’t think you’re ready for this.”

“Wrong,” I declared, looking him in the eyes. “I crossed a good chunk of the Probability Maze with all the inherent trails and tribulations to get here. There is no task that I cannot be ready for with preparation. This is no exception.” He stood looking at me a long moment and he saw no wavering in my resolve.

“If you think you’re ready, follow the gold light. Do not return home until you’ve faced the demon.” Behind him a section of the wall slid aside revealing a corridor more in line with the look and feel of the Machine’s interior. Even as the man faded away, a line of golden light sprang up in the floor leading through the opening.

“What demon?” I called, knowing even as I did so that I wouldn’t get an answer. I was right, too. Stepping out of the room, I followed the gold light. And after only thirty feet I came within sight of the great Diamond. As always, it was flawless. At the center it was as big around as a good sized tree and that’s where its own light sprang from. From top to bottom the great diamond was about three feet long. This was the heart and soul of the Machine.

And it was also the hardest part of walking the Machine. The last ten feet.

Here, one ran into the Diamond’s defense field. Only those of the Diamond family could walk the Machine and live. At least that was the theory. And only one of us could touch the Diamond and pass the field. That part, I knew for a certainty. As I took a step forward, I could feel the magics and powers trying to trick me into leaving or turning around. Time began doing tricks and for what seemed like an hour I could hear a single drawn out beat of my heart. Using all my willpower, I lifted my foot and began taking a step.

The Machine hit me with the memory of my nanny dying. She’d been a vibrant young woman who’d been as close to me as my mother. While walking home one day, she’d been run down by a wagon. She’d died on the spot. This vivacious woman was the first person close to me who’d died. It had come as a terrible shock and I’d cried myself to sleep for a week. But we all died. Some of us lived full lives and some were cut tragically short. Either way, we survivors carried on.

Time seemed more normal now but that didn’t mean the machine was easing up. I took another step, feeling the sweat beading up on my forehead with the effort.

A quiet, yet desperate fear washed over me. It happened shortly after my first walk through the machine. I had still buzzed with the powers implanted in me. Seeking adventure, I’d stepped through one of the mirrors located in the heart of the machine. I’d found a huge pair of ogres attacking a circled camp of wagons. Most of the people had already fled into the woods but a few battled on. I’d dashed into the fight and had indeed killed the first monster quickly with a knife through the back of its skull. But the second one ignored those attacking it to hit me. I should have known better than to attack so recklessly. I’d literally flown through the air to roll up next to a tree.

Ribs had been broken. Organs damaged. Blood dribbled out of my mouth. Painfully, I'd managed to sit up with my back against the tree. With only one opponent, it looked like the defenders just might win. A disturbing heat washed over me. I'd finally walked the Machine and now I was going to die on the first world I went to.

Except I hadn't. The ogre had eventually gotten the upper hand and had chased the surviving defenders off into the woods. I sat there with my life ebbing away but refused to give up. An hour later, people had started filtering back into the camp. One of them had been a healer. She'd helped me hold on. I wouldn't give up then and I wouldn't give up now.

I took another step towards the golden glow of the diamond.

Humiliation welled up within me. I hadn't know who the arrogant young man was. While crossing a world fragment, I'd come upon my exit gate. Only to find him blocking it.

"None may pass," he'd called. He was handsome and wore an old fashioned plate armor.

"Do you seek some sort of toll?" I'd asked. I'd run across brigands playing that number once before.

"No. This passageway is barred to travel," he'd declared.

"For how long?"

"So long as necessary."

"That's not good enough. I have business along that path. Step aside or I'll have to move you."

"In that case," he replied grimly. "I challenge you. A duel of swords. You win, you pass. You lose, you return the way you came."

"Very well," I'd replied angrily. "I accept your challenge." We both dismounted and had begun fighting. He used a broadsword but was very quick with it. I used a katana that I'd summoned from home. And I'd soon learned that despite his youthful good looks, he was very talented. This close, I could feel the magic humming from his sword. The line of sparks I scored along his armor told me the metal plating was magical as well. And he knew how to use what he had. In short order I was fighting defensively. And I was still losing.

With a beautiful move, he closed, allowing my blade to scrape harmlessly off his armor. He bound my arm with his and disarmed me even as he forced me to my knees. "You have lost."

"Never!" I'd snarled, furious that he'd beaten me and with such apparent ease.

"There is no shame in losing. Only in failing to learn from the loss. You fought well. Do not sully that. Abide by your word and return the way you came." And he'd been right. He'd fought honorably. I'd been beaten fairly. I'd left with poor grace. I knew better now. On several facets I knew better. To be perfectly honest, in hindsight, I kinda wished I'd gotten his name so I could have looked him up later.

I took the final step and touched the great Diamond. It recognized me and the light suddenly changed from gold to blue. And just like that I was past the defenses. So tired I was almost staggering, I walked over to one of the divans and collapsed down onto it.

After resting a while, I noticed that the primary transport mirror looked into the huge amphitheater. And on the stage lay a book.

I'd done it. Still, I decided to rest a bit before claiming my prize. Food and drink were always in the heart of the machine. Not a lot, and not very good, but it was enough to sustain. Considering my dwindling resources, I was glad to have it.

After a short nap, I stepped through the mirror and found myself in the amphitheater next to the book. And that was when I realized that the book was not a normal sized book. No, it was about

five foot in length along the spine with approximately four foot wide pages. I guessed the thickness to be a little over a foot. The Book of Knowledge of the Planes and Worlds Outside the Terran Reality. I'd done it! But my excitement faded rapidly and a thoughtful frown crossed my face.

"Now how in the world am I supposed to move you?" I asked with an exasperated sigh. And to my surprise the book opened and flipped through to a page. The page had information about the magic of the world this amphitheater was linked to. So, I sat and read about just how magic here was different from what I preferred. The differences were small but important.

For a long while after I finished reading, I practiced my sorcery. Now that I knew the differences in how magic here worked, my spells functioned as they were supposed to. Closing the book, I sat down on the cover and cast a levitation spell. The book and I rocketed towards the hole in the distant ceiling. Soon, we were racing up the white brick tower. Now that we were using my magic, the return trip was going much more quickly than the initial passage. It took only thirty minutes to get back to the ladder and the trap door in the ceiling. And that posed another problem. While I remembered a lot of spells that were useful for performing everyday chores as well as an impressive arsenal of attack and defensive spells, I didn't know a single spell for shrinking an artifact.

With the right protections I supposed I could blow the top off the tower, but that just seemed wrong. Eventually, I opened the hatch so that I could see out into the red sky full of floating worlds. I then spent a couple of hours adapting a short teleportation spell so it would work on the book. Considering the inherent power of the book, this was not easily done despite the fact it only took me a couple of hours. The spell worked the first time and I caught the book with another levitation spell before it could fall and possibly become damaged.

After that, it was simply a matter of loading it into my little boat and driving us back to the interworld gate leading out of this realm. And once there, I suddenly understood what Grandpa Titus had meant when he'd mentioned the demon. Next to the gate stood none other than Lord Corin Mannus, the Darkseer, lord of the demon fortress city of Dul Malice.

"Hello Corin. You're a long way from home," I greeted him, face carefully neutral.

"Hello beautiful lady. It's pleasure to see you again. What is that you've got there?"

"At this time, I'd have to say that the pleasure's all yours. I suppose you've been following me all the way from the House Daemon's lands?"

"Yes," he replied, looking none too happy about it. "And not an easy task I might add. But Solla insisted."

"What's it going to take to get you to go back home?" I asked with a sigh.

"A good look at what you've got there. Kinda looks like some sort of oversized book."

I moved between him and the book. "How about you just turn around, go home, and make up something for Solla?"

"Ooh, sounds like you've got something important there. Maybe something important enough to get me promoted." He knew about the book. From where he stood he could probably see some of the cover and the writing there. After listening to Grandpa Titus' speech about how the book had to be kept out of the wrong hands and how word couldn't be allowed to leak out, I knew I should probably kill the half demon.

But I didn't want to. Killing for the king, as I had done on many occasions, was for the good of the nation. Killing Corin, Lord Mannus, would certainly make my life easier. Would make the artifact I had sitting on the floating boat that much more secure, once I had it properly placed. But that was my problem and I hated to kill him simply because he learned about my project. As he stepped around me, I hit him in the jaw with a palm strike and he dropped like a rock. Evidently he'd

held onto the false impression that I wasn't a warrior. That, or he didn't think I'd hit him. Unsure what to do with him, I tied him up and dropped him in the boat behind the book.

And from behind a tree walked a tall woman with hair that was literally golden. She wore a simple white gown and my gaze was drawn to her bronze-colored eyes. And just like that I remembered what had happened in her shrine back in the Machine.

We'd talked for a while. Me, the Regillian duchess and Edotoman princess and her, the archangel of healing. She knew all about me. We'd talked about why I did certain things. The question of 'why' seemed very important to her. She'd ended our conversation by telling me that if I did not kill the next enemy I crossed, that she'd grant me a boon.

"Hello again," she greeted me in her delightfully musical voice. I had the impression that she was toning down how strongly she manifested for my benefit.

"Hello," I replied with a smile, my spirits buoyed simply by her presence.

"I see you didn't kill him. Despite the facts that he's a half demon and knows about the book."

"He had no control over his heritage. His actions have marked him as a pain in the butt, but not as a bad man. I can't kill him simply to make my life easier."

"I'm pleased," she replied gently. "Tell me, what boon would you have?"

"I don't feel comfortable with one of the great archangels owing me anything. I had the impression in our previous talk that maybe Granpa Titus coerced your cooperation. If so, I'm sorry. Any way you look at it, you don't owe me anything."

She looked at me a long moment. "Titus only asked. Are you certain you will not take advantage of a boon? These things tend to be once in a lifetime offers."

"Thank you," I told her earnestly. "But my answer must remain 'no'. I've done nothing to earn such a gift. I would like to follow a little more in your footsteps, but I will do so as I'm able and in good time."

"You have a good heart," she replied. "Since you will not take a boon, I will give one. This half demon's memory of meeting you here will be erased and he'll wake up far away from here."

"Oh, thank you!" I felt a flood of relief wash over me.

"And if you're truly interested in walking in my footsteps, I might suggest you take some advanced medical training." And just like that she and the Lord Mannus were gone.

It was with a light heart I began lugging the book back home.