

## Toys

When you and your family enjoy a much elongated lifespan, certain doors are opened for you. When you throw in great wealth and the ability to travel between worlds, you find many more doors open before you. And somewhere along the way, you start collecting stuff. At first, it's simply something that catches your eye from an exotic place. Perhaps a piece of artwork or cloth or any of a number of other possible items. As time passes, your tastes become more refined. The items you collect become more valuable. More rarified. And so it is that we of House Diamond have gained a reputation as collectors of rare and valuable items.

Some of these are items of power.

One day, long ago, I was testing my abilities to move unseen within the Castellum Regillia. While sneaking around, I came to a locked door down in the huge labyrinth we called our dungeons. I'd never been through this particular door and was curious. So, I pulled out a set of lockpicks and set to work. After fifteen seconds, a minor spell went off and my picks melted. Stepping back, I frowned and studied the door. It was a heavy, smooth door of some sort of imported hardwood and was bound with forged steel. To all outward appearances, it looked just like any other normal door in the dungeon. However, this door had been ensorcelled. Why someone would bother doing that piqued my curiosity. I determined that I would get through this door one way or another.

Fifteen years later, I still hadn't gotten inside.

Of course, I now only worked on the door a few days out of each year. My schedule had become pretty busy by that time. Still, I found it quite annoying that I remained unable to get through this door. I now put a lot of time and effort into planning the few attempts I managed each year.

Today, it was time for my latest attempt. Pulling back the hood of my darksuit, I began setting the items from my equipment bag out in the order I'd need them. It took a minute. Taking a deep breath, I began. First off, I pressed the four metal cylinders I'd picked up on a distant world into each corner of the door. Each stuck in place with the help of a powerful chemical adhesive that my labs at Dyle Alchemical had developed. The rods were powerful magic nullifiers. They might not disable the magic on the lock but I hoped they'd prevent any pre-cast, contingency spells from going off.

Next, I worked a special putty around the locking plate so that it went all the way around the doorknob. I pressed a silver spike down in-between the stones of the floor so that only a little of the spike was visible. More easily said than done to be sure. Especially since I had to do it quietly. I then attached a cord of unicorn hair from the putty to the spike. This should channel away any reactive magics that I might set off from within the metal doorplate or lock. Anything powerful enough that the cylinders couldn't nullify. Operative word being 'should'.

Whoever had setup the defenses on this door had certainly known what they were doing.

With that in place, I began working on the lock with a variety of mundane and magical sets of lockpicks. I also tried a variety of spells I'd learned for opening doors and locks as preparing for these attempts had become something of a hobby. The cylinders and putty wouldn't effect my spells as I'd had them made with my magic as an exception. All to no avail. Six hours later, I gave up for

the year and re-gathered my equipment and stowed it away again. I was just preparing to leave when I discerned an irregularity in the door that I hadn't noticed before. Looking more closely, I found it was a small depression. A depression so small it could have been made by someone sticking the door with a needle. At least it could have been if it had been done before the defensive spells had been put in place rendering the door invulnerable to any physical or magical damage I was able to inflict upon it. Looking around, I found three more of these tiny indentions.

Hmm. The four dots were evenly spaced. One set of them was about four inches apart and about chest high to me. Evenly in between them were the other two dots, one above and one... below....

Oh, no. It couldn't be that easy. Closing my eyes, I began quietly cursing.

Of course it could be just that easy.

With a sigh, I reopened my eyes. Even with the indentations, I drew the Diamond sign in the air and flashed a tiny bit of power into it so that it glowed a bright blue for a moment. Upon the door, the same Diamond burned blue with the points being those damned depressions on the door. The door opened with a click.

Fifteen years.

However, stepping into the room behind the door, I immediately forgot all about the time it had taken me to get here. Because here turned out to be the workroom of Great Grandfather Titus Diamond, the Ascended One. It was entirely possible that he'd built the pieces of the great machine right here. In this very room.

Awestruck, I slowly wandered the room. There was no dust. It looked like he'd only just stepped out for a cup of tea. On a shelf, I found a dozen journals. Each held notes about building the great machine. In a bookcase, I found books detailing his discoveries about the nature of the worlds. This was an incredible treasure trove of knowledge. Everyone would be so excited to learn about.... Except, no one else could know about this.

No one had found this room for a reason. The knowledge kept within here was too dangerous to let out... even to the family. Perhaps, especially for the family.

Still, I continued to look around. In a leather pouch I found an old communications mirror. Possibly, one of the first such mirrors. The styling was ancient and beautiful with gold inserts and scrollwork featuring a number of magical beasts. The mirror itself was made of polished bronze instead of silver. Casting a simple spell, I learned the rune code for this mirror and then placed the code into my own mirror. Who knew, perhaps one day Grandfather Titus might decide to descend back for a visit with his family? If he did, then I'd be able to contact him mirror-to-mirror.

Continuing my tour of the workshop, I came upon a table full of unbound notes. With the notes was a picture of a book. The Book of Knowledge. At least that was the short version of the name. The long version was The Book of Knowledge of the Planes and Worlds Outside the Terran Reality. These notes detailed information he'd found on clues to the location of this most wondrous of books. I stood there a long moment before scooping up these pages. I'd go to a lot of trouble to get a really good bottle of wine. I'd go even further to get a top quality weapon or bolt of truly fine cloth. But raw knowledge like that... I'd have packed for a journey to hell itself for an artifact like that.

And after reading through Grandfather Titus' notes, I discovered that hell itself wasn't too far off the required path.

There was no doubt about it. I needed an assistant. Planning for my excursion to find the Book of Knowledge was not turning out to be easy. The path to get to the world it was hidden on crossed a number of unpleasant worlds and world fragments. Not a few of them required specialized equipment to pass thru alive. Some of it magical, some of it technological, and quite a bit of it neither. Doing the acquisition and planning, while trying to run my blossoming company, and while coming up with alchemical formulas for new products at the same time, turned out to be quite a bit more difficult than I had anticipated. Add to it the fact that the king still required me to go on the occasional mission to kill someone and ‘difficult’ took on a whole new meaning.

In the last month I’d had three secretaries quit. Too much travel, work hours that were too long and too peculiar, and I kept having to depart at odd moments, leaving them to face the board of directors, the research team, or important clients on their own. It just wasn’t working out.

So, I hired more people. But then someone had to train them. Which might pay off in the long run, but right now it was eating away any spare time I might have dreamed about.

And as a result, I’d missed two social events. Since I’d chosen to act the part of a lady in public, such an occurrence had never taken place. Now it had happened twice. The first of which offended one of my company’s oldest customers and the other set back a burgeoning friendship with a visiting member of the Variata family, one of the other great houses. She had been visiting the realm on a trade mission. Smoothing over matters with the customer took much more time than merely attending the party would have. And the Variata was a missed opportunity that would not be easily recaptured. For the moment I was forced to simply send a note with an apology. No excuses. I never make excuses. Just the apology.

Late one afternoon, approximately a week later, I received word that yet another shipment of our products was going to be late. This would make the fifth time in less than a month. Coming as the news did on top of all the other problems that had been plaguing the company, I stopped what I was doing and called an executive meeting.

During this meeting, I demoted one of the oldest vice presidents to goodwill ambassador. He’d been with the company from the very beginning but that was also his problem. He feared change. Another, I fired outright. When he showed his contempt for me and declared that he owned enough stock to fight me for control of the company, I reminded him and everyone else that while I was a nice lady, I was also a sorceress and a Diamond, who did not appreciate anyone’s contempt. On the spot, I turned him into a cat, sent out a flier with a note I’d written, and thus purchased the bank his home mortgage was through. I made the entire executive team sit in silence while we waited on the messenger to fly back. When she returned to inform me that the deal was done, I called his mortgage loan due immediately after changing him back to human. Reluctantly, he agreed to sign over his stock shares in return for the papers to his ancestral mansion. At a nod from me, security threw him out of the building. I then politely suggested that the rest of the executives might want to work a bit harder and make sure that their departments performed as expected.

Our products miraculously began going out on schedule.

And this allowed me the time to return to gathering the toys I needed to get the greatest toy of all. The Book of Knowledge. Three years after finally unlocking the door into Great Granpa’s laboratory, I began my journey to find and claim the book.

The Rose Thorn was a frigate of ancient design with sixty variously sized cannon spread out across the top three decks. She'd been magically enhanced to move faster, be tougher, and hit harder than any normal frigate of her class dared dream. I occasionally took her out pirate hunting and on company sponsored cruises. Her crew were Dyle security troops and were typically the creme de la creme. This voyage was likely to task both ship and crew to the fullest of their considerable abilities.

Despite the Rose Thorn's extraordinary speed, it took three months and sailing through over a dozen naval interworld passageways before we arrived at my first destination: a small world called Ortis.

Leaving the captain to oversee reprovisioning, I went ashore with a group of marines. I rented the top floor of an inn near the docks and set up my temporary headquarters there. That task completed, I set my ship's quartermaster loose upon the town while I took my horse Juji out to a nearby monastery.

The few remaining brothers who inhabited the rundown holy building were all that remained of what had once been a thriving school dedicated to the knowledge and wisdom of the archangels. It was sad to see the place so diminished.

Inside, a small donation was enough to get me a tour of the place. I halted our tour at the shrine to Gabriel. The statue here depicted Gabriel as a woman. Gabriel's depicted gender changed frequently, depending upon the world. So far as I could tell, on about half the worlds Gabriel was female, neuter on some few, and the rest male. I took from this that the great angels could appear to mortals however they wished. Not everyone saw it this way but we each must follow as we see fit.

Within the shrine, I drew the sign of the diamond in the air and powered it softly. It hung in the air burning with a faint blue light. And I felt an echo from within the statue of Gabriel. It wasn't magic from the machine but it was similar. I took a moment to sooth the priest who had been providing the tour. The bag of gold I handed him calmed him to the point where he was content to simply stand back and watch. Indeed, the gold seemed to completely ease his concerns over the strange magic being used within his shrine.

Moving quickly, I cast a number of spells in quick succession. Ever so slowly, a bag of old, brown leather emerged from the base of the statue leaving the statue itself unharmed as had been my intent. It was a beautiful statue and I had always been a big fan of Gabriel's. It would have greatly saddened me to have had to destroy a statue honoring one of the beloved archangels... even for so important a quest as this.

Examining the bag, I found the closing flap marked with Titus' stag-within-the-diamond seal. Opening it, I found a strange compass. It was almost a foot wide and made of brass. Mounted within two englobing, circular rails made of some sort of steel, it was most peculiar in design. The needle pointed in one direction and remained fixed in that direction no matter how I turned it. Yes. This fit the clues from Granpa Titus' notes. This was the guide I'd been seeking. I had many, many more clues, but they wouldn't be useful until later. Not until after I found my way through the first couple of steps. This was merely the beginning. After a brief but heartfelt prayer, I returned to the inn with my prize.

Two days later, the quartermaster informed me that we were reprovisioned and that he had been able to find the various gear necessary for the next leg of the trek. With my new guide mounted on the bridge, we sailed with the morning tide on the third day. We had a long and dangerous sail ahead of us.