

## Chapter 6 – Night Lands

Callum stood in the dusty darkness of the portal rear for a few minutes, feeling the homebond vibrate his vis while he stretched out with his senses to make sure that nobody had noticed his entrance. The little space he was in was screened from either side and there was a lot of mana pouring through, so he hoped that it wouldn't be obvious that he'd teleported there.

He was proven right when the mage bubbles didn't move. That was true on either side of the portal, as both sides had an access chamber guarded by people. The difference with the Night Lands was those people were vampires.

Now that he was more familiar with things, he could tell the difference between them and a normal human solely from the vis they carried inside them and not just the change in features. Actually, Callum was a lot more worried about them than he was about the mages. It had become clear that mages didn't generally have the senses to pick him up so long as he was being quiet and out of sight, but a vampire might well see or hear or smell him and move faster than Callum could react. He didn't want to stay in close proximity for very long.

The building in the Night Lands actually was a castle, and like in the dragonlands the area was absolutely saturated in mana. It took more effort than he liked to get his perceptions through the thick stone walls and figure out where he was in relation to everything. Like every castle it was far larger than was strictly practical, with a truly fantastic number of rooms and broad, tall hallways. Unlike the compound on the other side, it was built with quarried blocks and practically oozed age.

It was definitely inhabited, or at least staffed, with a mix of vampires and mages and, uncomfortably, normal people. Or at least humans without the standard mage bubble. It made at least a little bit of sense, because a castle demanded menial labor and he couldn't see mages stooping to cooking and cleaning. But in an off-Earth, vampire-filled castle, that seemed like a pretty terrible existence.

Or they might just be people like Lucy, supernatural duds employed by GAR in whatever jobs. It was a mistake to think that just because the people weren't supernatural, they'd be on his side. He didn't notice any marks of blatant slavery so there was at least some measure of civility. It was something to look into after he was finished, because he'd need a hell of a plan to think about dealing with an entire castle in any meaningful way.

Fortunately, castles were not exactly tall. Even if it was a magical castle, the roof overhead was well within Callum's range and, what was better, had some nice sheltered

areas he could put himself in. Selecting an alcove at the base of a turret, he popped himself to the outside.

The first thing he noticed was the moon. It was enormous and full, covering half the sky, seeming almost close enough he could touch it. Unlike the silvery illumination of Earth's moon, the one in the Night Lands gave off a sort of weird, grey-blue glow, even if it made no sense for glow to be that color. That rendered everything outside dim and dark, somewhere past twilight but not the deep dark of a moonless night.

The moon itself wasn't crater-scarred and barren like Earth's moon either, instead slowly rippling as if it were made out of water. It was just as alien a sight as the endless cliff face of the dragonlands, and in many ways far more breathtaking. The utter blankness and blackness of the rest of the sky only emphasized the way the moon dominated everything.

Despite the dragonlands being in eternal day, or at least having a cycle longer than he'd been there, the Night Lands being, well, night still somehow surprised him. It was stupid, especially since the name told him all he needed to know, but actually crossing from day to night so sharply was disconcerting. He was just glad he had his spatial perceptions, because his night vision was not anywhere good enough for the Night Lands.

Not that it was particularly dark in the town. Unsurprisingly, the castle and the portal was surrounded by more buildings, though he wasn't sure town was the quite the right word for the sprawl of civilization. There were lights along the streets and shining through house windows, a blue-white that reminded Callum of natural gas more than anything, though he suspected it was all enchantment-based. Trees and gardens shone green under spotlights

The layout was a little weird too, the building clustered together, and it took him a bit to understand that he was seeing a bunch of close estates rather than a normal town.

He'd known that mages had a significant presence in the portal worlds, but it was still odd to see. Since it seemed quite likely the night was a permanent one, he didn't know how any person could stand to stay permanently, but the huge estates probably had more than enough light. It wouldn't be too different from people who stayed indoors all day anyway, and there was always the teleportation network if they wanted to get somewhere on Earth.

Considering the abundant mana, he could even see why people would *want* to live in a portal world, though he found it far too strange for his tastes. Part of that was how, just like the dragonlands, the space itself seemed a little bit weird, a little bit off. He didn't know how he'd articulate it, but if mages didn't notice it, they'd probably only enjoy the

benefits of the mana. At least sprawling out on this side of the portal meant they messed with the real world less, or so he hoped.

There was a lot to learn in the town, since as he focused down on some of the streetlights he could see they were far more complex light enchantments than anything he'd seen in his books. If the estates held full mages and the sort of magical technology they were used to, he could figure out a lot of useful things. But that was only if he was willing to stick around, and he really wasn't.

He wasn't sure if it was local day or night or if that was entirely irrelevant, but there were people moving about outside, probably vampires, and he did not want to attract any attention. If he pretended to be mundane, he wouldn't know how to act, and if he pretended to be a mage, he didn't have a functional tattoo or knowledge background to pass any real scrutiny.

From his vantage point he couldn't tell exactly which direction was the shortest way to get out of the town, though he figured he was near the center, so he chose the darkest direction and went that way. Since there were mages around muddying up the local mana, he decided against making any cleanup enchantments from some of the spare metal he was carrying. In fact, he wasn't sure it would work the same considering the far more intense mana, and he castigated himself for not experimenting back in the dragonlands.

Instead he popped himself along the path of the roads, using trees to keep out of the sight of anyone nearby and keeping far away from any pedestrians. As annoying as it was, the sickening tingle of the primed teleport was what gave him the courage to do it, though it was vanishingly unlikely anyone would really stop him. The security checks at the portal meant that they wouldn't be on the alert for a random mage who wasn't supposed to be there.

He followed the lit road until it left the surrounding estates and carved a path off into the darkness in a long trail of faint illumination. There he took a sharp turn to leave the trappings of civilization. While he'd noticed the difference in the spatial feel between Earth and the Night Lands almost immediately after arriving, the border between the settlement and the wilderness was even sharper. The pressure against moving his vis threads was higher even than the dragonlands and the general weirdness of the way things were put together stronger. The wilderness definitely *felt* unsettled.

Even if the darkness wasn't welcoming, he wasn't going to try and get what he needed from the town or follow the road to whatever its ultimate destination was. Whatever passed for civilization in the night lands would be too full of either mages or of vampires for his tastes. Not only were people the real danger to him, but if he wanted enchanting materials he didn't want to compete for them.

It wasn't to say that the Night Lands were harmless aside from the vampires. There had to be something for drafted mages to fight, after all. There was a front, somewhere out in the darkness, that held the line against the hostile denizens of the Night Lands, both intelligent and not. From what he read, not only were there hostile vampires not aligned with GAR, but also entire regions that seemed to spawn predatory horrors. Considering vampires fit that description, Callum wasn't surprised.

The literature Lucy had provided contained lurid descriptions of possible beasts that ran the gamut from formless, gibbering masses of teeth and darkness to massive wormlike creatures the size of skyscrapers, encroaching on the safer parts of the Night Lands. Personally, Callum suspected those were things of ages past, if they'd ever existed at all, but it was the only information he had so he had to give it some respect.

However, all that was out at the front, and back closer to the portal the Night Lands were semi-tamed. Which wasn't to say that the wilderness was completely safe. Away from the front, the main threat was apparently from something called a moon-stirge, basically a cow-sized wasp with a matching temperament. Clearly they weren't any significant threat near the portal settlement, since there were no walls and people out in the open, but it was something he'd have to keep an eye out for once he got further into the wilderness.

What there weren't any of were zombies, ghouls, ghosts, ghastrs, or other sorts of greebles. In fact, the entire portal world had a weirdly truncated ecology. There was a type of grass, looking nearly black in the unnatural light of the moon, and here and there were gnarled trees with ghostly gray leaves, but there weren't any insects. Nothing buzzing or humming. No bird calls, nothing but silence.

It was incredibly oppressive, and Callum found himself holding his breath at times as he headed off perpendicular to the road. He was extremely glad that he had a superb sense of direction thanks to his spatial magic, because the lights faded very quickly into the distance and he was surrounded by an endless plain of black grass broken up by the gray spots of the weird trees.

He knew he was looking for cenotes, but with the completely uniform terrain he didn't know what the signs would be. Though he figured that *any* deviation would be worth investigating. Even his ability to see straight through the ground didn't seem to help, since the soil and bedrock seemed to be just as monotonous and featureless as the surface. The only things that seemed to break the sameness of the layers were the extensive root systems the trees had.

Still, he could scan six hundred yards in every direction, so he felt he had a pretty good chance of running across something that would give him a lead. If not, he'd just go back and rethink things. For the moment he let the vis he was trickling into his focus

fade, sighing in relief as the harsh jangling sensations abated. He could keep it mostly charged, and for the moment he needed all his focus to pay attention to the Night Lands.

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Nasser Tannenhaur sniffed curiously as he passed the High Road out of Weltentor. Then he sniffed again, following a faint scent to the edge of the lanterns. It was not strong, but it was clear that someone had gone out in that direction, and if he was not mistaken, that someone was a mage. That was a very curious thing, since anything beyond the lights was fair game for whatever roamed the black plains. Or whoever.

There were other settlements, true, but not of mages, so none of them could be the destination. The only reason the mages left Weltentor and went out was to acquire pearls from the wells of moonwater that dotted the Night Lands. All the ones from the well at Weltentor were long since spoken for, and besides, clearing out the wells as they appeared nearby provided useful extra stocks of moonwater.

Such expeditions were always in groups, however, with a vampire guide to sniff out any recently manifested well. The moon had been quiescent for weeks, as well, so all the nearby wells had already been claimed and harvested. There was not a single reason he could think of for a lone mage to stray outside the light.

It wasn't exactly his problem. He just kept an eye on Weltentor's boundaries by order of the Master, just in case some new arrival or even a rival Master decided to make trouble. A human mage wandering off wasn't a threat to Weltentor, but it was strange enough that he decided he'd report it. He reached up to touch the scry-com on his lapel, activating the enchantment that connected it to the operator back in Weltentor Keep.

"Acknowledged," came the cool female voice of the operator.

"Nasser, reporting," he said. "I have the track of a lone mage heading out along the High Road."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, I just have a faint scent. Possibly an air mage, moving quickly? It's too faint for someone not using travel magic."

"Acknowledged," the operator replied. "Wait one."

Nasser did, drumming his fingers against the hilt of his blade. He knew that on Earth, they used bullets forged of pearls rather than blades, but the Night Lands were still civilized. He just hoped that he wasn't supposed to go out after the lone mage. Without

light, the land itself changed with the whims of the moon and could make it difficult to track anyone who didn't have proper illumination.

"Nasser, return to base," the operator said.

"Acknowledged," he replied, and headed back to Weltentor Keep, breezing along at speed. It was best not to keep his superiors waiting, and besides, he'd have an opportunity to refill on moonwater. He'd tried the blood the wretches on the other side of the portal had to make do with, and was not impressed. Moonwater was better, though even blood was preferable to the ashes he had available before he came through the portal.

He entered Weltentor Keep, bowing his head to higher-ranked guards and following the hallway to the security office. There, he expected to see the Warleader, or perhaps a representative of the humans, considering the subject of his report. What he did not expect was the black uniform of no House and the pin of the Bureau of Secret Enforcement.

Nasser stood somewhat straighter at that. He understood the deference to their mage allies, but he generally did not find them particularly impressive. The BSE men, however, were colder and harder than a Master and wielded their magic with deadly efficacy. The sight of the black uniform was enough to make Nasser even more cautious than usual.

"Grand Magus Taisen," Warleader Van Harr introduced the man. Nasser inclined his head.

"Grand Magus," he greeted the man.

"You said you found the track of a lone mage," Taisen said. "Could you identify the person?"

"I do not think so," Nasser said thoughtfully, after considering it for a moment. "The track was very faint, but it very clearly went outside the light border. It was a single scent, but I could not swear I would be able to pick it out from any other mage scents."

"That is unfortunate," Taisen said, in the sort of dead tone that the Master used before someone died, but fortunately Taisen did not have that kind of authority. Instead he just turned to Warleader Van Harr. "We have been pursuing a renegade mage. While it seems unlikely one slipped past the guards here, we are taking this seriously. There is no point in pursuit, not in the Night Lands, but we want to be on high alert if and when they return to cross back to Earth."

“I will report this to the Master,” the Warleader said. “I am certain he will marshal our forces as you request.”

“Excellent.” Taisen said. “Show me to him.”

Both Nasser and Van Harr bristled at that, but the aura of power Taisen had gathered about himself demonstrated why it was not a good idea to take offense. Aside from the fact that it would raise hell with GAR and make the Master displeased. Warleader Van Harr scowled but turned to point deeper into the keep.

“This way, Grand Mage Taisen. Nasser, you are dismissed.”

Nasser saluted Taisen and hastened away, down to the canteen where he could get some moonwater. It sounded like he'd be pulling double shifts for the next few days, and he was going to need it.

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The literature on the Night Lands was very much not sufficient. It wasn't that there were creatures stalking him or anything, the place might as well have been a desert. The emptiness was creepy, but he wasn't overly worried about that. The problem was that the landscape changed.

That particular shift had only happened once so far, the moon above beating like the pulse of a giant heart, and everything just rearranged itself in a mass of flickering shadows. The space and magic in his perceptions shuddered, twisted, and warped in a convulsive burst before it snapped back into place, his surroundings suddenly different. Where there had once been a grassy plain, there were rolling, scrubby hills of dark gray rock and blue moss. It seemed like everything outside him had been squeezed and reassembled without regard for what was already there.

Callum cursed to himself and started teleporting back the way he'd come. While the phenomenon was as interesting as it was horrifying, it made him fear that he'd just gotten himself lost in the portal world. The intense spatial distortions were probably how the portal had formed in the first place, which would have been fascinating if he weren't terrified he was lost in an alien world.

It was a massive relief to see the lights gleaming exactly where his sense of direction said they should. He stood on the black grass and stared for a bit, reassuring himself the town was really there, before heaving a sigh and turning to head back out. If the change didn't move him or the buildings, the landscape changing wasn't a huge issue. At least, if it didn't decide to bury him or the like. That said, he was uniquely immune to being buried, and if the settlement was still around it seemed that turning everything into a towering ocean was not to be expected.

He had wasted a lot of time backtracking, though. Callum took an angle to his original path, since he'd already established there were no cenotes that way, and teleported his way through the newly-created hills that were just as silent as the plains before. What was interesting was that they only appeared out of sight of the settlement, so perhaps there was something about magic or people that stabilized the landscape.

At least the prevalence of mana helped with the exertion of rapid-fire teleporting, though he made sure to just hike for a while after each spate. He was forced to haul his luggage along with gravitykinesis, though, since the uneven stone underfoot didn't lend itself to the little wheels. Plus, making any kind of noise felt like a mistake, and he even found himself breathing quietly as he walked.

Eventually he started yawning, since his clock and his body agreed it was late, and the dim surroundings didn't help. Callum really didn't like the idea of camping out in the open, despite not having seen any trace of anything living, but he wasn't really going to have a choice. Even though it was likely to change at any moment, Callum found as sheltered a nook as he could manage and broke out the tent.

He was glad he'd resupplied himself before coming, and could fill himself up on jerky, trail rations, and water. For some reason making a fire seemed an exceedingly bad idea, if for no other reason than it'd be a beacon in the darkness. Eventually he compromised by setting up a small hand-crank battery lantern inside a firmly zipped tent, just so he'd have something to look at other than grey-blue darkness.

While he'd have to catch some sleep, he did while away a little bit of time practicing with the new magical structures. He still had no luck dialing down his thread power, but flexing threads to make them flutter seemed at least possible. It was a bit of a road from flat threads to tubes, but he'd at least made a start.

Adjusting his normal, simple, and intuitive portals so they had recirculating structures was actually more of an issue. He'd gotten so used to making them that trying to alter them felt uncomfortable. It didn't help that trying to add in the new structures meant that the portal never formed, or the entire mana structure collapsed. Or blew apart.

He wasn't completely disheartened, since the trick was obviously an advanced one, but it didn't exactly put him in the best mood. Still, he dutifully recorded his attempts in his notebook before snuffing the light and closing his eyes. In the end, he only caught fits and snatches of sleep, the overwhelming silence and heavy mana making him restless. Callum decided that once he was done with his foray he would have to find a good safehouse and just crash for a few days.

For better or for worse, there wasn't another moon-pulse and landscape-rearrangement during what passed for night, and when his watch told him it was early morning he



figured he might as well get up. Actually, he would have preferred it return to the grassy plain because the rocky hills made digging a hole for his morning ablutions rather difficult. He really wished he had foci to take care of certain biological realities.

He scrubbed his face with a moist towelette and packed up, heading onward and outward to find a cenote. Frustratingly, it seemed that he'd given up just slightly too early the night before, because in less than an hour his spatial sense found movement off to one side. He couldn't see it with the naked eye, or even hear anything, but as soon as he focused on it he could tell it was one of the stirges.

The thing was under one of the grey trees, chewing on it with horrific mandibles. That was actually fairly ordinary, but the fact that the root system of the tree kept trying to stab the stirge was not. They hadn't looked like anything special to his senses before, but the tree was using them as spears, albeit to not great effect. Still, he was glad he hadn't actually gone near one of the trees. Maybe he would have been fast enough to get out of the way, maybe not.

Callum flattened himself against the ground and teleported himself in a big circle around the stirge, hoping that its presence meant there was a cenote around. He absolutely did not want to get any closer than he needed to. Wasps were bad enough; a wasp with a stinger like an icepick was pure nightmare fuel.

Before he could investigate that much the stirge finished whatever it was doing and extended its wings, which were completely silent as it flitted off. He followed at a distance, the maximum distance he could, only able to perceive it with his spatial senses. The total flight wasn't far, though, two miles at most before the cenote he'd been looking for came in view.

It was maybe fifty feet across and almost perfectly circular, like someone had drilled a hole into the ground. It was also over two hundred feet deep, about half of that full of some kind of liquid that was even stronger in mana than the surroundings. In fact it seemed like it was the source of mana, energy oozing up out of the cenote.

He could guess right away that it normally took multiple mages to clear such a thing. First of all, there was an appropriately large nest of stirges, living in the stone walls of the well. There were too many to count, and they made the idea of getting anywhere near the well a non-starter. While Callum had plenty of tricks, he didn't fancy his chances against a swarm of oversized wasps.

That wasn't even accounting for what was in the waters, or whatever the cenote was actually filled with. There were fleshy pods clinging to the walls with long, spiked tentacles. Whenever one of the wasps drifted down to drink from the water surface, the nearest tentacle-pod would try and grapple it, churning up the surface of the water.

There were also smaller shapes in the water, arrowpoints of some kind of fish, and round lumpen things at the very bottom. While neither of them seemed particularly offensive to his senses, he was entirely certain that, considering every other form of life he'd seen in the Night Lands, they were quite nasty.

Even with all that, he was sure that it wasn't *too* dangerous for competent mages to clear out. True, he didn't know how magic-resistant the life might be, since it was very clearly more energized than anything on Earth, but they were still animals. Group tactics and probably some flamethrowers would account for the stirges, while the tentacle things could be taken care of with old-fashioned dynamite.

Hopefully actual mages would have better tools than those.

At the very bottom of the cenote, scattered among the lumpy things, were small spheres resting on the rock that had the weird, dense feel of the vampire seal or, to a lesser extent, the bullets and enchanting materials. It was immediately obvious that was the mordite he'd come for, but so far as he could tell there wasn't anything overly special about it other than the amount of mana inside it.

Carefully, ever so carefully, he stretched out a thread of vis to wrap a teleport construct around the spheres. So far, he'd seen it was very possible for people to notice and react to his magic, and there was no reason that animals couldn't do the same. This time, he didn't even have any handy walls and portals to hide behind, but if he was slow and subtle about it, he might be able to grab the stuff without disturbing anything.

He'd half-expected it to be hard to handle the mordite, given the energy density, rather like Clara or the pixie, but there was no resistance at all when he teleported it away. The sphere, about the size of a grape, appeared in the compartment in his luggage he'd reserved for enchanting stuff. At the same time, a ripple ran through the not-water, something slightly different from the splashing and thrashing of the tentacled limpets.

That wasn't good.

Either his magic was more noticeable than he'd liked or removing the mordite spheres was more disruptive than he'd hoped. There was a little bit of a stir from the fish and the lumps, but nothing major. Yet.

Callum took a moment to consider, then made himself a little action plan. First, he wrapped his teleport framework around some of the not-water and teleported it into one of the empty water bottles in his luggage. Even if he had no idea what it was, or what it was good for, it was magical and worth having some to fiddle around with. Then he reached out and got ready to take as many mordite spheres as he could in one go.

Eight seemed to be his limit, but that was fine. That'd still be quite a bit of raw enchanting material, at a quality far higher than anything he'd seen. It was certainly a far cry from the powdered stuff, and possibly even purer than what he'd seen in the teleportation network or the homebond. It was hard to tell with those, because they were just thin wires, which raised the question of how people with larger native vis threads enchanted them.

He made a mental note to write down that question later and yanked on the teleports. The eight spheres of mordite dropped into his luggage, and the cenote went wild. The not-water started to fizzle and bubble, the lumps at the bottom of the cenote unfolded into long, snakelike things that shot toward the surface, and the stirges exploded into the air.

Callum teleported directly away from the mess, and quickly, with an involuntary shiver. It was the first time there was actual *noise* in the Night Lands, a combination of hissing and buzzing, and it sounded incredibly angry. He didn't know whether the cenote inhabitants would be able to track him down, but even if they didn't, that might well draw other creatures or even vampires or mages. The latter would be a problem, since he had no time to clean up after himself, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

Several miles later, he stopped and waited, listening and straining his perceptions for anything that might be following him. There was silence and stillness, so far as he could tell, and he let out a long breath and sat down to take a look at his loot. He didn't want to touch any of it, because for all he knew it was toxic, so he just got out his lantern and shone it into the luggage container briefly.

The nine mordite spheres he had looked like tiny versions of the moon overhead, slowly rippling surfaces and all. In his perceptions they were solid, so the visual effect wasn't entirely real, but since he couldn't see mana visually, glamours and all, it wasn't that either. He'd need better light to study it more, and that wasn't going to happen in the Night Lands.

For once things seemed to be going fairly well, so he zipped up the container again and started back toward the gate. Since he hadn't been ambushed between the portals, the fae might have lost the trail by now, and if they hadn't, hanging around in a portal world wouldn't help. While he would have liked to think that stowing away on an intercontinental flight was enough, he wasn't sure about that. He *did* know that there were limitations, else he'd have been found far earlier.

All he needed to do was get back through the gate and he could settle down to make some serious items and do some serious practice. His notebook held a number of half-coherent thoughts for foci that he could work on, and ways he could protect himself or

others. He still was determined not to be a mercenary, but he could at least be more considered in his responses.

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Bartholomew Janry's Shift Survey was going well. They'd already found and cleared five wells in the controlled lands around Weltentor, which was near the limit for the normal appearance rate. The only issue had been the update by scry-com to be on the lookout for a lone, possibly rogue mage wandering the Night Lands, but they hadn't seen anything like that. Even if they had, Bart's team could have handled it.

"There's some noise to our eight o'clock," Garan's voice came over the scry-com, the wind mage being their dedicated listener as well as their transportation.

"Combat ready, everyone," Bart instructed. "Take us there, Garan."

They readied their shields, pulling up their active combat forms. Shards of force whirled around Bart, air congealed in front of Garan, and Christopher crystallized shards of ice. Edgar formed four sets of portals, the logistical support meaning there was no chance of any of them being flanked, let alone surrounded.

Most mages didn't actually fight with a spatial talent on their side, given how rare they were, but Shift Surveys always needed one. Not only was their absolute sense of direction necessary to keep from getting lost, especially if a Shift happened outside the bounds of an illuminated area, but they could energize a large enough portal to siphon the moonwater off to Weltentor. Bart had found that even without any offensive abilities, the flexibility of instant movement was very helpful.

A few minutes of flight brought them within range of a cenote that seemed to have already been disturbed, the stirges swarming and the moonwater thrashing with barbed limpets and the guardian kraken. He flexed his vis through the flight focus and took point, with Garan and Christopher flanking. Edgar, of course, stayed back, but his portals darted ahead.

The stirges swarmed up at them, and Bat sent his force darts arcing through them. Like most animals in the portal worlds, they had *some* resistance to magic, but not enough to stop the spell form of a competent mage. Their torsos exploded in a shower of gore, and Edgar caught the falling corpses in one of his portals.

They were used to fighting together, ice and force projectiles wreaking havoc on the stirge swarm while wind broke up groups or smashed the creatures together. Portals let them reposition at will, bouncing back and forth and utterly ignoring the stirge's attempts to surround them. Not that the creatures were all that dangerous, but those harpoon

stingers actually *could* punch through a mage's shield, and none of them wanted to take the risk.

In a few minutes they'd eradicated the swarm, with the carcasses piled up in a gory heap, while the limpets and kraken snapped and strained madly from their places in the cenote. Edgar came closer and took the paired focus from his backpack, setting it on the ground as he focused his vis through it. The portal manifested in front of him, and he sent it flying off over the cenote and down to start taking in the moonwater.

The aquatic beasts flailed at the portal but Edgar held it together, draining the moonwater into the immense cistern in Weltentor. The net there would catch the fish and other things floating in the water, and without the moon-water to float in and absorb, the kraken and limpets would be easy enough to dispatch. For Christopher to dispatch, anyway; they were *tough*, and had to practically be frozen solid to die.

Neither he nor Garan were going to get near those flailing, razored tentacles.

"So, why was this already active?" Bart asked aloud.

"Another well nearby? Maybe they fought?"

"I'd give you five to one odds it was that lone mage we're suppose to be watching for," Edgar said, concentrating on holding the portal intact against the flailing tendrils.

"Could be, but it would be pretty stupid to rile up a cenote like this by yourself," Bart replied.

"You wouldn't get much out of it," Edgar agreed, using a smaller portal to get a better perspective on the cenote as he lowered the drain. The reflection of the moon in the glowing water was dead and dry rather than shimmering and liquid, a reminder of how different the intrinsic magic of the Night Lands was from the familiar spell forms of human magery.

Christopher approached and started to freeze the bits of flesh that were revealed by the dropping water, staying well out of range as frost coated the inside of the well. For his part, Bart stayed back by Edgar, watching through the perspective portal and holding several force magic constructs ready just in case. While it seemed routine, every single creature in the Night Lands could kill an unprepared mage in a single blow, so nothing could be left to chance.

As the drain portal reached the bottom of the cenote, the moon-water reduced to a few inches, the lumps of mordite came into view. Only, most of them were gone. Bart stared at the empty depressions where the bane-metal should have been, and then

lifted his scry-com to report in. However their lone mage had done it, they had *definitely* been there.