

“So ends the tale of Sir Robert the Drake, one of the land’s most noble drakes to ever exist.” The dreaded gamemaster decreed. She stood up to punctuate this point. Her hands flew upwards, and with a quick work of her wrist, pressed a small remote. The room flickered, a sound of a trumpet played, followed by generic cheers. Once ended, claps filled the air. A whistle or two accompanied these sounds of joys.

“Solid as ever!” A small caucasian man spoke. He sat opposite to a large Polyneisan man, who gave the woman a thumbs up. The only other woman in the group nodded approvingly, while a blonde man and an African-American fellow were much more quiet with their words. The gamemaster dropped her robes, revealing a cute brunette with a tight bun. Face a bit on the rounder side, it only enhanced her cuteness to some. Emily smiled at her friends, she bowed and twirled her hand like a ringmaster after a show.

“Thank you! Thank you. Don’t be so kind! Trent, that maneuver with the collapsing pillar was spectacular.” She pointed to the Polynesian, who clapped both hands together and began to shake them. Next, she finger gunned the small caucasian, who perked up at the sight. “Marcus, Ser Lefland cutting down fourteen orcs was a bit risky even at this level. If you took even one more bad roll.”

Emily mocked sliced her neck, Marcus clutched his heart in equal shock. The two laughed, right before the gamester addressed the others. Nikki, the only other girl, waited while Emily spoke her observations.

“You came in clutch at the end with the *Cure Light Wounds*, alongside Percy.” The other caucasian man, a blonde, shared a glance over to Nikki. The two fist-bumped.

“And always a delight whenever you’re here Bradley.” The African-American, Bradley, sighed.

“I know, I’m sorry, but work’s been kicking my ass all month! I’ll come more often!” He bemoaned. Emily put up both of her hands to try to placate him. She undone her robes to reveal a slightly chubby physique.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kick you from the group, Bradley. It’s all good.” The woman spoke while in the middle of putting her robes up. “I’m just glad we can meet again. Now then, let’s split the XP, the loot, and every other odd artifact we have. Everyone ready?”

Various ‘Yes’ and ‘Yeps’ replied to Emily. She sat down, cracked her knuckles, and began to speak. After twenty-minutes, a majority of which was spent on who killed the Red-Iron Golem, the group began to clean up. It wasn’t too harsh of a clean-up, considering they were in the backroom of her shop. Can clinked together right before, paper plates were stuffed into bags, Nikki swept the floors because nobody else wanted to do that. Finished, the crew began to put their tables and chairs away. Emily was wiping her hands when Nikki came from behind. She tapped her friend’s shoulder.

“Hey Emily. Here’s a gift.” She held it. It looked to be a wrapped square. Emily tilted her head to the side. She grabbed Nikki’s gift, slowly unwrapped, then peaked at what she received. It was a book, carmine red with a golden trim. Hefty too, about four-hundred, maybe four-hundred fifty pages. The brunette blinked as she read the top of it, “Stanley Caridan’s World of Arenthan”; Emily turned to look at Nikki, who smiled gently. The others watched Emily embrace their companion.

“Thank you! It's amazing!”

“Yeah, I had it made when I asked to borrow your GM’s guide, don’t worry, I ignored the parts that had ‘Spoilers’ on them.” Nikki patted her shoulder. Emily placed the book on an empty shelf. She’d read it later. Her mind wandered onto her uncle though, she missed him.

‘A freak accident," the police told her two weeks ago on a Monday. He went missing on Saturday and they only fished him on Sunday. The storm, which they named as the cause of his accident, throttled his body tremendously, which was why he wasn't immediately identified. It wasn't until his boat was found that they managed to find his next of kin. That was the most unpleasant afternoon that Emily ever had. But, she believed she was healing.

After reading a couple of sections, Emily said her goodbyes. The group walked away from her leaving her to close up shop. The brunette grabbed her book, made sure her backpack was full of supplies, then searched through her pockets for her keys. She finished locking the store up and made her way over to a lone bike rack. There, she fiddled with a couple of locks, and planted herself onto the seat.

She rubbed her hand over the handles of the bike. It was from Stanley, he got it around a year ago. It was a nice bike, a dark black with some white flame decals on it. A bit tacky, but she enjoyed it. Emily sighed. She put up her kickstand then began to pedal away. It was still somewhat bright out, so she didn't worry much about turning her headlights on. She was told multiple times that would be good, but she frankly ignored those pleas.

"I'm a good biker; I don't need nobody to tell me what to do." She mumbled, half replying to an old memory from an argument between her and her uncle.. Emily didn't wear a helmet while in the city either, though admittedly she did feel that *this* was a bad habit. She curved her way through Lawrence, the suburbs where her store was located, towards Little Troy to the north. The sound of rubber wheels on the road plus the occasional honk of a car horn filled her ears before she arrived at her destination. Located at the end of a Cul-De-Sac was a strangely built three-story house. It's old wood exterior, combined with boarded windows, gave it the appearance of a haunted house.

What set it apart from others was the load of flowers and gifts on the driveway and porch. Currently, they were getting picked up by an older woman, long hair stretching down her face. Dressed in black still, the woman looked up to see Emily, who parked and locked her bike on a nearby post and waved to her.

“Lisa!” Emily gave a quick hug to her cousin, and someone who she considered a sister. Lisa embraced Emily as well; though cousins they shared a few similarities. Her brown hair, some of her the curvature of her brow, a bit of the nose. Skinnier than Emily and taller too. The older woman held Emily’s embrace before letting her go.

“What are you doing here? You should’ve called! I would’ve gotten here sooner. ”

“Don’t worry, I just got here. And I know, I know, but Auntie Florence called yesterday and wanted to see how the house is doing.” Lisa explained. The two walked up the porch, Lisa found a place to dump the gifts so she could have a free hand. Rummaging at her side, she pulled a key out then opened the door. Emily helped her cousin bring in the gifts, finding a spot in the kitchen.

“Why’s that? Considering how close your dad was with the neighbors, I don’t think anything’s going to happen to it.”

Lisa rubbed the back of her head. Emily went over to the fridge and began pouring juice into a couple of cups. Thankfully, the juice had not expired. A consideration that Emily admonished herself for forgetting, Stanley has-he had- a bad habit of letting perishables expire and letting them ferment in his fridge.

“She’s considering moving from Florida to here, she wants the place.”

“Really? I thought she liked the weather in Florida. She went down there just for it.”

“You know how she gets, remember how she stayed with you, dad, and I when your father passed. For like five months she was doing the housework. She’d be wracked with guilt if something happened to the both of us. Well, to you anyways, I’m a bit farther north ”

Emily nodded, drinking her juice. The two talked and reminisced about Lisa's father. Eventually they broke off to inspect the house. Lisa informed Emily about making sure everything was in order for Florence's arrival. Lights were turned off and on, faucets were checked, Emily even looked at every window she could find. Hearing if it cracked or came off their hinges. When they were finished, they met back in the living room. After going over everything, Lisa made sure that Stanely's gifts were gathered into one spot. Emily watched her cousin pass by a frame, she stopped to take one look at herself and her father. An old photo showed Stanely proudly grinning with Lisa at her graduation.

She walked over to comfort Lisa, her arms wrapped around her cousin's body. They stood silent until it was broken:

"Only fifty-nine. He had so much time left." Lisa muttered. "Nature's an asshole."

The two stayed silent until they broke off. They continued checking the house until Lisa excused herself, she needed to head drive home. Now alone, Emily wandered the empty house. Her fingers ran across picture frames and laminated documents; degrees, magazines, postcards, and the like. She wandered the home until a thought flashed in her head, her trek took her to the third story of the house. The brunette's hand reached upwards, they caught a piece of string. Using all of her strength, she pulled down the hatch that led towards the attic.

She stepped upwards, it was dark but she managed to grab a lamp and lit an area of the attic up. It was the same as when she last saw it. Cabinets neatly pushed to the walls, with little plaques separating each area from one another. Some cabinets had a variety of memorabilia covering them which fit their themes; feather boas for a cabinet titled 'Acting (Never Made It)' or glass cups that had mascots on them for 'Drinks' were just a few examples.

Emily wandered around until she reached what she was looking for. A cabinet, covered in old magazines, with the words 'Tabletop' in a gray slate. She smiled.

“There you are, just where Uncle Stanley left you. Let’s see if you still have everything in you.” Emily plopped down to rummage through the cabinet.

“Old character sheets, his old pens.” Emily held up a small bag. Inside were a number of dice carved from a blue stone she couldn’t name. “His old dice, I remember when he used to play with them when I was young. So many memories.”

The room was starting to get a bit cramped for Emily, so the lady stood up. A few tears covered her face. She breathed in and out until she found a semblance of peace. Then, she continued. Her hands flicked latches and opened the cabinet’s drawers, there a variety of folders greeted her. Each one marked with parts of her uncle’s campaign world. She had the book, which her uncle himself had made, but these were extra copies that had been modified with his footnotes. Emily randomly plucked one, opened it, and saw papers for the folder’s contents:

“Valnaroath, northernmost citadel of the High-King of Terror. Four-hundred by seven-hundred feet. Four storeys tall; two storeys deep. In the middle, the dark tower topped by a white dome, sits or sat General Aurum, the Gold Lord. His forces included....”

Emily remembered this, she had run this campaign awhile ago. It was three, four weeks ago that she remembered her gang taking the General down. She chuckled, she just realized that the High-King of Terror’s forces were almost depleted. General Aurum, Copernicus Cretin, The Dreaded Spider-Singer, Wothak the Wowzard, Lady Isyrbell, Solar Siren, Richnelo the Mercenary Tyrant; all of them defeated, maybe not in one campaign, but over a period of years the group had played together. All except one, well two if you didn’t count the High-King of Terror, though her uncle always assured her that he’d eventually make the adventure to deal with the despot.

Now, Emily realized, that opportunity would never come again. The young lass twiddled her fingers over each folder, reminiscing about the past and wondering about the future. She needed to take care of the store, get her uncle's affairs in order, and prepare for her aunt's arrival. It was a little much, but she believed she could do it.

Just as she was about to close the drawers, something caught her eye.

“What do we have here?”

She carefully took one folder out and peered closely at the surface. A faint gray line showed across its surface. No, she realized, not just one line, but multiple, almost an image.

“That's odd, how come I never saw this before.” She peered back into the drawers. Emily's hands picked another one out from the rows, there was nothing on it. She was about to dismiss this as an oddity she never noticed before, but curiosity filled her. Her hands shot to another drawer to sate her curiosity; pulling out another folder, she could see that it was gray-crossed as well.

It finally clicked, what the two folders had in common was the fact they were the ‘Big Bads’ folders, all of her uncle's endgame bosses. Quickly, she took the other folders out and began to put them together. Faint gray lines across all of their surfaces, she never even fathomed they were here. The markings were too faint for her sight though, Emily then found Uncle Stanley's pens and began to mark the folder's surface. The young woman had them splayed on the ground while she worked. Every line was traced until a spark of revelation overcame her. When she finished, the young woman combined the colored folders together.

“Aha, I know where this is.” Emily smiled at her finished creation.

It was a map of the attic! The front of each folder was like a jigsaw puzzle, and Emily managed to figure it out. Yet, there was something slightly altered. Her curiosity continued to rise, each step echoing in the attic. Emily bent down to the floor, her fingers traced a pattern. The map indicated that there was a latch or curved notch in the...

“Got it, now let’s see what Uncle Stanley got under here.” Emily’s finger caught hold of the groove and she pulled. After a few moments all was revealed. Inside the crevice was a tome, a black book depicting three unicorns and a dragon rising against a shadowy being. It was studded with gems, they glowed lightly which made Emily curious about their authenticity. Beside them, much to Emily’s shock and wonder, were nearly thirty, maybe even thirty-five, gold bars. They were something out of Fort Knotts or from an old cartoon. Various other scattered wealth could be found in this hole. There were loose gems, a golden bracelet, a golden necklace, twenty rings of silver with tiny sapphires in them, and much more.

“This does explain why Uncle Stanley never had to worry about money.” A chuckle nervously escaped her throat. Did the IRS know about this, and more importantly, should she even report it? The question escaped her head, she wanted to see what the tome was about. Her fingers traced the sides of it, it felt torn in a couple of places. Curiosity got the better of her. One hand grabbed the front and opened it to the first page.

“The Darkness that was hidden has now returned.” Emily read aloud. “Heroes are needed for the final fight.”

“Wait, what’s this supposed to mea..” A bright flash and a ringing noise filled Emily’s ears.

Her eyes widened and spots filled her vision. Colors passed her sight like bullets in the air. Emily couldn’t help but yelp in shock. Right before she was abruptly stopped. Floating in a vast whiteness, Emily raised her hand and tried to grip anything. No such luck, she was in a void. Her heart beated in her chest, strangely she didn’t feel a hint of worry. Surprise and shock, sure, but any sense of terror wasn’t present.

A voice filled the air around her. Soothing, authoritarian; stern, and mother-like—all words that flashed through Emily's head hearing it, or her, speak.

“Hero; relations to two, descendant of another. Would you kindly pick your: species and class?”

“Dark Elf.” Emily's mind immediately answered, going into autopilot. It was as if she had done this before. “Multi-class and...”

Emily rattled off every single thing she could think of to create her character. Height, weight, appearance, and supplies she needed. Plus some spells and a few cantrips couldn't hurt. It came oddly natural for her, yet a part of her was screaming to keep quiet. When she finished, the voice was silent for a minute before it spoke again.

“Focal Hero, very important; choose a benefit and flaw to grant to yourself before continuing.”

A list with words, split into two columns, flashed before Emily. Confusion was swept away and Emily pounced upon the list like she was born to do this. One hand swiped down and up one column while the opposite did the same. Eventually she chose her abilities. Faster leveling up and Unrelenting Ass---ults, the latter of which Emily couldn't quite figure out. Another moment of silence filled the air until the voice spoke one more.

“Completed, welcome Emily Cariden to the Quest ‘Defeating Mavin the Queen of Airy Darkness.’ She is still weak, defeat her and finally end the High-King of Terror's dark empire forever.” The voice informed “The changes you made will go into effect in 5...4...3...2....1”

Emily's vision was consumed by another flash of white.

