

The process of developing the one-shot "Aid the Elderly"

I knew in advance that our usual group would be down one player for the Saturday session, so I wanted to find a single-session side quest that the remaining three players could do (level 5 warrior, druid, cleric). Friday afternoon, I Googled for D&D side quests and found <https://www.dndnames.com/tools/side-quest-generator.php> which yielded many snippets, including this one:

While in between harrowing adventures, the players meet a kindly old lady who requests their help with innocuous chores. Unknown to the players, these rituals summon a demon.

I threw that in ChatGPT <https://chat.openai.com/share/de32afc4-8dc7-4601-8e5b-251dd197878e> which gave more ideas. Some of them survived in the final writeup. The more I thought about it, the less I wanted the premise to be overtly underhanded, but took a bit before I came up with a scenario that could be played ambiguously. These are all the notes I had before starting the actual play session:

Unknown language.

White cat with blue eyes looking out from the attic.

Larger on the inside.

Ruby vial with unknown liquid inside.

Feed cats. Must be fed a mix of beef, chicken, deer, and kraken. They must be fed in their cages, since they will otherwise fight over the food. One doesn't want to get in the cage to eat, so have to coax it in. Every cat in a cage causes a sigil to light up.

Arrange rocks and light candles. Green basalt, blue obsidian, red gabbro, orange scoria, white rhyolite. Every time it is done correctly, it drains 1 point of strength, but in a way that won't be noticed unless rolling high.

Craft or buy incense from certain flowers and put it in front of all statues. Blue dandelion, red lotus, purple rose, black dahlia, green tulip. Lowers temperature.

Finally read poems from a book. One in Elvish, one in Draconic, and one in Primordial (Dwarven script). The poems are actually cleverly disguised spells of holding.

Lady Elara Timell. Spells of holding the demon must be renewed every decade or so, when the stars align. But a few cycles back, the demon got loose enough to curse Elara so that she can't cast the spells herself, and must instead have unwitting helpers do almost all the work for her. She hides this work by appearing elderly and asking for help with a spring cleaning and renewal ritual.

Shopkeeper Haston, son of Frimtol

Amulet of Half Tongues

Hold the amulet and name a language. For the next hour, the wearer of the amulet can talk in that language. Only talk, though. They cannot understand the language, but they can read texts in the language out loud, without consciously comprehending what they are saying.

I finished the map just before we started playing. Literally exported it from the [map maker](#) and inserted it into

the [VII](#) as we were catching up with small talk.

The rest of the details got filled in as the players were going about their business.

The idea that the tower should reject magic came up very late. The Cleric was the first to cast a spell, and it happened to be Detect Magic, and I didn't think anything of it other than to inform her that literally everything around her was showing up as magic. Later on, the Druid wanted to Wild Shape to get through the keyhole to the attic hatch, and I figured that was too easy a solution, so I threw in the "*roll a D20, see if that works at all*" - she rolled high and managed to turn into a small spider that could unlock the hatch, but then I had the spell expire immediately afterwards. Subsequent spells were subject to the D20 roll. And it just worked out that detecting magic should work because that would heighten the mystery, but anything else should be resisted.

I had drawn the map with less and less of the street and garden visible the higher up it was, mostly because I was lazy and figured I'd explain it away somehow. This is also the first map I've ever made, and the first time I've used this program. The idea that time was wonky came from the players being paranoid that they couldn't see details out the windows (but they never asked me or Elara about this), so they were scared of being caught on the upper floors, away from the world. It was crystalized by one of the characters looking through the telescope where I informed her that she could see bright and shiny stars, which then turned into it being nighttime up here.

They made it into the attic well before going to the basement, so they had a long "conversation" with the cat (only yes or no or shrug answers). They came up with that idea, btw. I didn't really want the demon to communicate, but the Druid asked if the cat could understand what they were saying and to raise one paw for yes and the other for no, and I rolled with it because that seemed an interesting twist. I then worked in the truthfulness aspect, because that felt fun.

It worked out great. They party vacillated between saving the cat and helping Elara, changing their minds a few times along the way. Even going so far as attempting to knock out Elara, which required me making up a reason why that wouldn't immediately succeed, but in a way that didn't directly lead to combat. Eventually they settled on helping her, though.

It took the players 2.5 hours to complete the quest. After which I wrote down all that happened, the on-the-fly rolls, and the thoughts behind it in the form of the finished "Aid the Elderly" one-shot.